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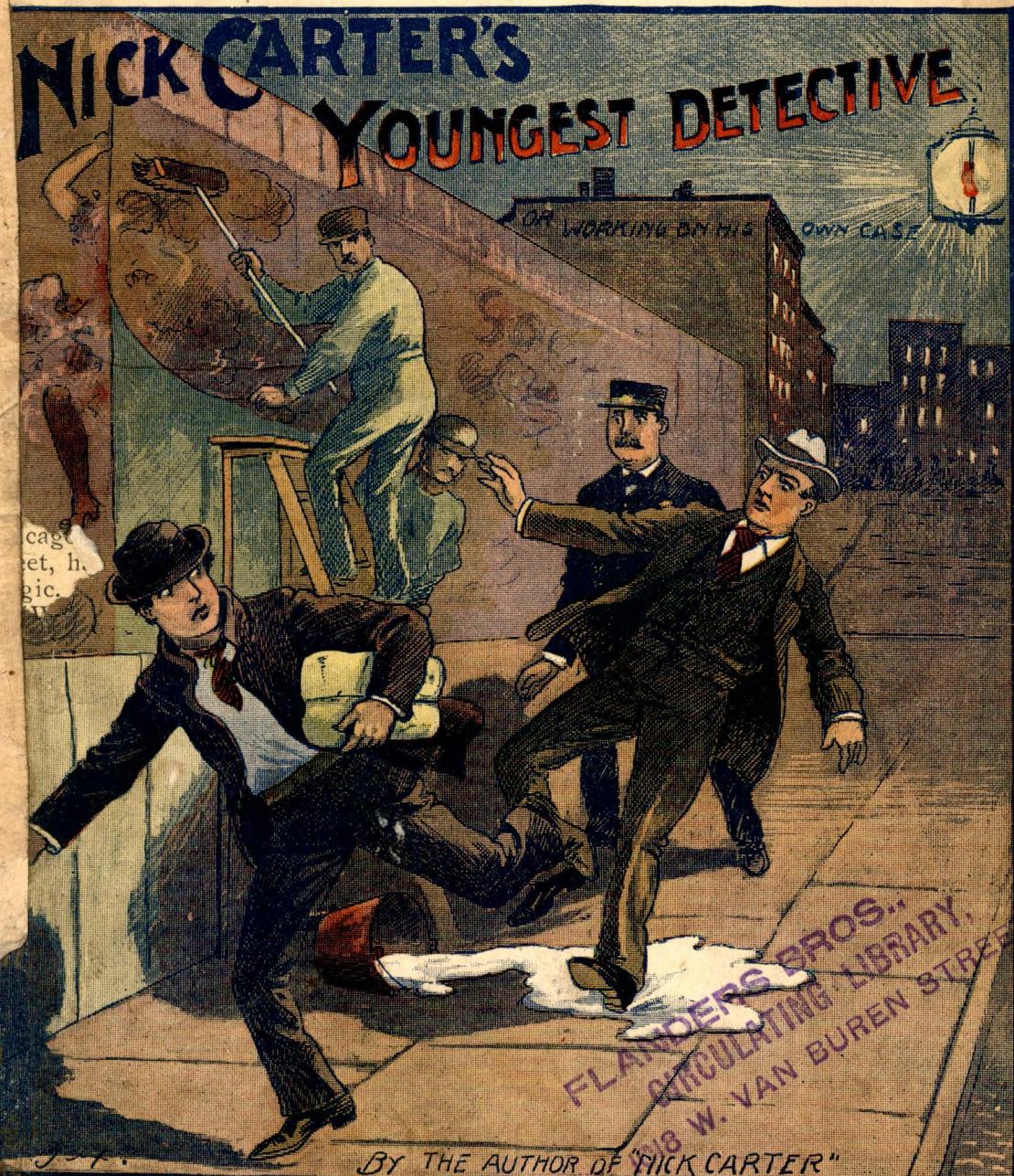
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

THE BOY'S FOOT TIPPED THE BUCKET AND NICK FOUND HIMSELF RIGHT IN THE CENTRE OF THE SPREADING STUFF.

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Nick Carter's Youngest Detective OR, WORKING ON HIS OWN CASE.

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

THE NOTORIOUS PAUL ELLIOTT.

"Stop him!"

The cry, ringing out clear and resolute, pierced the air like a pistol shot. It echoed down the busiest portion of Chicago's busiest thoroughfare, State Street, halting the startled pedestrians like a electric.

"What's up?"

"Look at that!"

A boy—handcuffed! And a man after him!

The excited words just described the action—a rushing blur came out clear in the piercing glare of the electric lamps. Two persons turning a corner had suddenly separated, and, like a spark dropped in a pan of gunpowder, the action had set the vicinity afire with excitement.

He was a man, and the badge he wore, safely concealed by his coat lapel, told that he was an officer of the law.

His companion was a boy—straight as an arrow, well-dressed, serious-eyed, but with a face pale as death.

Describing a slide, giving his companion a trip-catch with one foot, he had gone down the street like a flash.

The boy's late guardian had roused with a

shock. He uttered an alarmed cry, put forward, realized the disadvantage of age and clumsiness, and sought to secure assistance by waving his arms wildly, with that piercing mandate:

"Stop him!"

"What is it?" projected a pedestrian eagerly, running to his side and keeping up with him—"a prisoner?"

"A convict—deputy sheriff—taking him from court to the county jail—broke loose—stop him! stop him! stop him!"

"He can't get away—he's handcuffed."

"He's free!"

With a thrill the dozen odd people who had now joined the rushing officer saw something gleam in the wake of the scudding fugitive.

Clang—clatter.

Released in some marvelous way, the flying figure had flung down the pair of handcuffs one minute previous encircling the wrists.

The throng behind was increasing momentarily, but the boy had a clear lead.

Upon the pavement for nearly a square ahead fronted only large wholesale stores, closed for the night, and that side of the thoroughfare was consequently pretty nearly deserted.

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The officer's hat blew off, but he never stopped for it.

His face was working like a jelly, his eyes starting from their sockets.

If that flying form once turned into the next street, if it once got an opportunity to dodge into some doorway, court or area unobserved, escape was assured.

"Ten dollars if he's stopped!" puffed the deputy. "It's my position if he gets free."

"What's he done?"

"Who is he?"

"Elliott."

"What!"

"Paul Elliott!"

The name acted on the surging runners like an electric shock.

"Just convicted!"

"Sent up for life!"

"That boy!"

"The notorious Paul Elliott!"

The information given by the officer had excited an outcry that was fairly tumultuous.

It produced an effect decidedly favorable to his designs, for it attracted the attention of persons on the other side of the street farther down.

Several discerning the situation, made haste to get over and head off the fugitive.

Each time some one started to cross his track, however, the flying figure made a faster bolt ahead.

The fugitive was nearly to the corner now, so near that a realization of the fact brought a frenzied groan to the lips of the deputy sheriff, when something transpired that ended the flight and pursuit like the snuffing out of a candle.

Just ahead of the boy a truck stood backed to the curb, and to it from a store basement a man was carrying some empty packing cases.

He was a big brawny fellow, and he was holding a big heavy coverless box in front of him as he first heard the shouts directed at him.

"Stop that boy!"

"Ten dollars reward!"

"A hundred!" screamed the deputy. "Trip him up! Knock him down! I'm ruined if he escapes."

Slam!

Upright on its narrow end, down came the packing case.

Stretching out both arms, the burly teamster faced about.

The boy saw the barrier in his course, and circled toward the edge of the sidewalk to evade it.

He darted back, however, instantly. A man from the other side of the street was making for him, would certainly impede his flight if he kept straight ahead. There was ample space for a dive between the truckman and the inside edge of the walk.

The fugitive turned nimbly to take advantage of this, when his foot struck a piece of banana peel, or some like slippery refuse.

He came down with a fearful jar, his hands striking the smooth stones flat.

The truckman bent over eagerly. That one hundred dollar offer had pricked up ears and energy.

"Got you!" he roared with a chuckle.

"You young wildcat!"

The boy never let him touch him. His feet kicked out like piston rods, his fists beat the air like drumsticks.

He kept the burly giant fairly at bay—skinning his knuckles, striking his limbs, beating him off, trying to squirm erect.

"Why, you're slippery as an eel!" floundered the teamster breathlessly.

He had the boy in the grasp of one hand finally.

His captive darted a despairing look backward. Deputy and crowd were fast bearing down upon him.

He broke free from the teamster, but fell back as he did so.

Flop!

"Caged!"

The teamster had done a cute thing.

Choosing rather to hive up a squirming bundle of muscle and vim than to be buffeted and banged, seizing a glowing opportunity rightly offered, he deftly tilted the packing case.

The boy happened to be just beside it at that moment.

The teamster gave it a push. It fairly scooped up the fugitive.

Slam—its four edges came against the panel just under a window of the store front.

"Got him!"

With a triumphant chuckle the teamster noted that the flap of the boy's coat had caught under one edge. Then he sat squarely down on the box.

"Good for you!" quivered the deputy sheriff, rushing up to the spot.

The teamster grinned complacently at the circle of animated spectators about him, rubbed his perspiring face with his cuff, and demanded sharply.

"Now then, who said one hundred dollars?"

"Eh? Why—it was me but—see? That's who I am—deputy sheriff."

The speaker made a great showing of his official badge.

"Ge off," he ordered, "I want my prisoner. Many thanks, I tell you!"

The deputy began an eager movement to tilt up the box. The teamster put back his hand.

"Hold a bit, mister," he announced, and he planted his two hundred and fifty pounds more firmly than ever across the box; "let's know the ins and outs of this business."

"Why, its simple. I'm an officer, I tell you—"

"I don't doubt it, but you said something about a reward."

"That's right," put in a voice from the crowd.

"One hundred dollars."

"T—I meant ten. You see—come, come, my man! this is an important pris-

oner. He's Elliott."

"Eh!" cried the teamster—"you don't mean the Elliott the papers are full of?"

"The same."

"The boy who—"

"Yes," nodded the officer gravely, as the rest was understood by the whole

world.

The teamster uttered a resounding

g a glowhistle of wonder.

"Well," he said coolly, "if such a

tch isn't worth something, what is?

just besidends off, mister, officer or no officer.

here's the boy under this box. Proof?

ush. It fa his coat tail. I caught him. You

d a hundred. I claim it. Am I right?"

"Yes, yes," voiced the crowd unani-

w of the susly.

The deputy sheriff looked dreadfully

oyed.

Be reasonable, my man," he said.

"I'm a poorly pair employee of the county, and while my job would have been gone if the prisoner had escaped. I really can't pay you one hundred dollars."

"Fifty, then?"

"Say twenty, and I'll try and meet you."

"All right. Take him. And he's cheap!"

The teamster got off the box, delighted at his rare luck.

Like a mouser ready to dart at its prey, the eager deputy pulled one end of the packing case away from the building against which it had been jammed plumb.

"Grab him if he slips me," he told the throng of fluttering bystanders.

It was not every day that even a Chicago crowd enjoyed the excitement of chasing an escaped prisoner into a novel trap.

Especially such a prisoner—one of note, one whose name had filled the public prints for weeks and weeks.

Some craned their necks for this, the nearest they had approached to a sight of "the notorious Paul Elliott."

"There's his coat sticking out—grab that!" advised a bystander.

"Up she goes! You won't get away again, my hearty," jubilated the officer.

"Why—"

"The deuce!"

"Confusion!"

The deputy sheriff reeled back like a man struck by lightning.

The crowd peered, goggled and glared.

The teamster's hair fairly bristled with electrified amazement.

Over went the box, empty, showing the space against which its open end had rested blank as a tablet.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN OF MYSTERY.

"It's witchery!"

"Magic!"

"But I had him in that box—"

"I guess that fellow's going to faint."

"That fellow" was the deputy sheriff.

He had fallen against the box with a crash, completely unnerved.

The teamster simply rolled his eyes and puffed.

The crowd awed down to a half-fright-

ened silence. Here was the Indian box trick mystery with a vengeance.

"Now you see it, now you don't see it!" This is truly wonderful," pronounced an old gentleman who had kept up with the procession quite actively under the spur of prevailing excitement.

"Oh, I don't know that," spoke up a sharp voice, and a bright-faced mechanic pointed to the space against which the box had rested. "Cut his caught coat-tail off."

"That's easy to see," growled a bystander.

"And went," pursued the mechanic, "through that panel. See, he had a knife, the board's thin, he cut it out. Very simple."

The man poked his foot through a dark space under the store window as he spoke.

The discovery acted like an electric shock on the deputy.

"What's that?" he shouted, starting up. "Gone through that hole? Yes, it's so. He's in the store, the cellar. Let me after him—let me after him!"

The crowd scattered again. They resembled a pack of bloodhounds put on a new scent.

The officer struggled through the aperture with an abrupt bob, the teamster dashed down the area steps, others surrounded and descended various stairways leading to cellars and basements in the vicinity.

Those of the throng who remained awaiting the final outcome of the chase were greeted with a rare sight five minutes later.

The deputy sheriff appeared, hatless, dripping, covered with coal dust and whitewash from head to foot.

Behind him dolorously limped the teamster. They had "investigated things!"

The boy had been too shrewd to remain inactive where he had landed.

The panel he had cut out led into a sloping place under the window. He had kicked away two frail braces, had dropped to the basement, run across it, and had probably climbed through some one of the several unglazed windows opening on a rear alley.

At all events he could not be found,

and while his pursuers were blundering about promiscuously he had undoubtedly got squares away.

"I ought to be paid," grumbled the teamster.

"Why? For not catching the boy?" snapped the officer.

The crowd laughed. The deputy hurried to the nearest patrol box. A wagon soon dashed up.

Then the regular police began a regular search. Meantime, the boy who had added another sensational chapter to one of the most sensational crimes that ever electrified Chicago, was more than half a mile distant.

He stood panting, white-faced, in a deep doorway fronting the postoffice square.

They had called him Paul Elliott. That was a good, respectable name enough, and he looked both.

"The notorious Paul Elliott." Somehow, this did not seem to fit—the lurker looked unfortunate rather than criminal, persecuted rather than defiant.

Whatever his crime, whatever his situation, it was full of horror and dread and uncertainty—his haunted, hunted eye showed this if they showed anything.

"Free!" he murmured. "I have dreamed of it, I have planned for it day and night for a month. Now it has come what?"

His mind took a retrospect, and shrank and shivered, like one who looks back on the torture, the gantlet.

He swept the street keenly as if asking thence an inspiration for the future—quiver crossed his lip, firm set as it was as if risk, danger, perhaps defeat, menaced him there.

"Every man's hand against me," he breathed; "where, where shall I look for help?"

He winced as a newsboy ran by announcing the sensations in fresh print among them a reference to the convict of Paul Elliott.

The conversation of two pedestrians floated fragmentarily on his hearing—"Elliott—terrible depravity—so you just sentenced."

He glanced at a dead wall. His eyes and what purported to be his picture stared from a poster. Some enterprise in a

publisher had written him up, and was advertising the book.

"Branded—headed off at every turn, it seems useless to struggle—it seems almost incredible that I can even get out of the city," soliloquized the lurker, "and yet fate has favored me so far, why not farther? Ah!"

If a sense of his helplessness, with the police force of a great city employing all its machinery to run him down, had depressed him before, something the speaker now saw suddenly sent the fire to his eyes, his heart beating with new force, his whole frame nerved up to electric tension.

A man had just passed his range of vision—portly, neat, in the undress uniform of the local police.

"Detective-sergeant John Morris!" fell from the boy's lips, and he pronounced the name as if it held for him the doom of his destiny.

For that man and his doings had been woven into every hour, every act, and thought of Paul Elliott's life for the past thirty days.

He could feel again his firm hand on his arm, his accusing voice in his ear, his keen eye searching his very soul.

He could again see this man in the court-room, calm, confident, relentless, the proofs of crime, the clues in a great case before him, telling judge and jury a story, every word of which fastened sure and closer the meshes of a net of circumstantial evidence about him.

Here was his Nemesis, here was justice personified, here was law, sleek, well-fed, complacent over the successful conviction of "the notorious Paul Elliott."

"Good-evening, sergeant."

The boy drew back. He was perfectly safe in the deep shadow which shielded him, but he held his breath.

A pedestrian had greeted the well-known local detective celebrity, and both had halted.

"I want to congratulate you," proceeded the man who had stopped the officer.

"Thank you, chief," and the latter touched his hat deferentially, and yet with conscious pride.

"You have conducted this Elliott case in a way that reflects great credit on the department. It was a remarkable crime,

and you have run it down in a remarkable way."

"They tell me I had great clues," observed the sergeant, and he swelled up slightly—"unanswerable proofs; the knife, the letter, the slippers. I have them here."

The speaker held up a neat small parcel in his hand. The listening figure in the doorway gave a great start and a gasp.

"Ah, good!" nodded the chief. "You must preserve those among the department curios."

"Just so," acceded the sergeant; "only I am taking them to show to a friend first."

"A friend, eh?"

"Rather; an old New York acquaintance—one you know, at least one you have heard of."

"Indeed?"

The sergeant looked around him cautiously. Then he continued, in a lower tone of voice:

"A man I would not like to have pitted against me on the other side of the fence, even on as sure a case as the Elliott affair, I can tell you!"

"Why, who is he?"

The sergeant whispered a name that the listener could not catch. The chief's face lighted up with interest.

"What! is he in the city?"

"Just arrived, incog., under the rose, you understand? I wouldn't tell anybody but you."

"I should very much like to see our famous contemporary."

"Perhaps an opportunity may offer. I'll tell my friend," spoke the sergeant, uttering the words with great familiar relish. "I know he is always interested in detective matters, and used to be in me, so I will take great pleasure in showing him my fine work in the Elliott case."

"Where is he stopping, sergeant?"

"Palmer House, suite A—plain 'Robert Dickerson' this trip."

The two men parted. The figure in the doorway came a venturesome step forward into the light as they passed on.

His glance was riveted on the leisurely moving figure of the sergeant—upon that easy swinging hand of his holding the clues he had boasted of.

"If I had those!" breathed Paul Elliott

—“with what I know and guess and plan, if I had those, and freedom for a week—oh! I am cruelly circumstanced, hedged in, helpless. In an hour from now the hue and cry will be after me at every winding.”

His fingers twitched nervously in the direction of that package still, his form quivered restlessly, as if it was all he could do to restrain himself from putting after it and its possessor.

Even when the portly figure of the detective-sergeant had been swallowed up amid the moving mass of humanity, the boy stood looking dreamily down the street in the direction he had gone.

“Suite A, Palmer House?” he murmured; “who is there? Some great detective, I imagine, from what they said. The sergeant is going to tell him about my case—he is going to show him the hideous lot of clues that brought me so nearly to the foot of the gallows. ‘Robert Dicker-son, Suite A, Palmer House,’ and he said ‘a man I would not like to have pitted against me on the other side of the fence, even on as sure a case as the Elliott affair.’ Perhaps—but no, no!—who would interest themselves in a condemned escaped convict? Those clues, though, I must have them, I will have them!”

Some bold impulse nerved the boy to dauntless resolve. He set his lips firmly, his hands clinched close.

Pulling the flabby hat brim over his eyes, turning up the collar of his coat, concealing his face as best he could, he started down the pavement in the direction the detective-sergeant, John Morris, had just gone.

No one noticed him particularly. Even when he paused in front of the brilliantly lit Palmer House, a stray, seeming figure among the loitering throng of elegantly-dressed loungers, he discerned that he “passed with the crowd.”

He entered the rotunda. Where three of its great decorated pillars came together was a vacant chair and shadow. He sank to it, uncertain, thinking.

Abruptly he started up. Almost at his side a group of men were conversing. The sinister peculiarity of the first sentence that fell upon his hearing enchainèd Paul Elliott’s attention.

“The Man of Mystery!”

“That is what they call him.”

“What a queer title!”

“It fits him—he is a study and a wonder.”

“Is that him?”

“Yes.”

Paul Elliott craned his neck, and peered past the grouped pillars in the direction the speakers were looking.

Toward the grand staircase flitted a man; the athlete in muscular grace, the gentleman in bearing, a reader and a leader of hearts, judging from the combined keenness and courtliness of his glance.

“He seems to know everything,” resumed the last speaker. “A heart-broken countryman wandered in here yesterday looking for his runaway boy.”

“I saw him,” nodded one of the auditors. “Your man of mystery got interested in his pathetic story, made a few inquiries, was gone two hours, and came back with a forlorn-looking prodigal son. It was quite a touching bit of life in the great city to watch that meeting.”

“Isn’t he the same man who opened the hotel safe yesterday?” put in a third.

“When the night clerk forgot the combination, and a Pacific coast magnate had just four minutes to get his valuables locked up in it, and catch his train?—yes.”

“Why! he was over the marble counter in a flash. Out came his penknife, down to the quick he trimmed the left thumb and forefinger. He seized the knob, bent his ear, put his tongue to the disc, caught the vibration of the tumblers, and presto! he had it open in thirty-four seconds by the watch!”

“I saw a flashy fellow come in looking for victims this morning,” came another contribution. “I don’t know as he knew our man of mystery, but he caught his eye, and—pouf! he slid out as if the police force was after him.”

“They say he can open an ordinary lock with a toothpick.”

“And tell what time you got up by the creases in your coat.”

“He gets all his messages in cipher.”

“We’ll ask the clerk who he is.”

“No use.”

“Why not?”

“I tried it.”

"What did the clerk say?"

"Retired star of a science, prince of a profession, enjoying his leisure in a quiet way."

At that moment a portly figure hastened from the clerk's desk. Paul Elliott drew back with a quiver of dismay.

He instantly recognized Detective-sergeant John Morris.

He as well instantly discerned that the sergeant was intent on catching up with "the man of mystery," who had just reached a turn in the staircase.

On its first landing the sergeant overtook the latter. There was an interchange of words, they shook hands, and both resumed the ascent.

"It must be the 'Robert Dickerson' I heard Morris speak about to the chief," murmured Paul Elliott. "Yes, there is no doubt of it. 'A man of mystery,' 'a study, a wonder!' He 'does marvelous things!' Oh! if such a man knew—only knew the truth of my case, would he turn aside to help, out of pity, interest, curiosity? Suite A? It is on the next floor—a partly public floor. They have gone there. That package of clues! If I dared—I dare anything. It is my hope, my life, to get those!"

An impulse he could not resist drove Paul Elliott to his feet. He went up the staircase dangerously close on the heels of the man who believed him to be in safe custody.

As he reached the next floor he saw the twain he had momentarily lost sight of turning into a doorway.

Paul Elliott glided noiselessly up to it as it closed. Irresolute, he lingered there for a moment.

Then, like a burst of revelation, vivid and sudden, there fell upon his ears from beyond that portal just closed, words that set his memory a-thrill with a remembrance of wonderful exploits executed by a wonderful man—words that vaguely stirred his heart to augury, to excitement, to hope.

The bluff tones of the detective-sergeant, John Morris, echoed distinctly, revealing the true identity of the stranger within the gates—the remarkable "man of mystery."

"How do you do, Mr. Nick Carter!"

CHAPTER III.

A SLIDE FOR LIFE.

Nick Carter, for the man of mystery was indeed the great New York detective, greeted Sergeant Morris very pleasantly.

They were soon comfortably seated; old times were gone over, and the ex-patrolman who owed his first police experience to a recommending word from Nick, was promptly telling his patron the wonderful detective strike he had just made.

"You have read of the famous Elliott case, of course?" he inquired.

"I am posted on the outlines," nodded Nick, "and I see you are getting wonderful credit."

"I ran down the case myself," announced Morris, proudly.

"Good. That is the affair where Gabriel Elliott, a millionaire, was murdered by an adopted son, a mere boy?"

"It would have been the gallows instead of a life sentence if Paul Elliott had been a man," answered Morris. "In a nutshell, he and the old man had lived together for some years, and when Mr. Elliott received word that his niece, whom he had supposed to be dead, was coming to him from the South, the young ingrate decided to kill his benefactor."

"Why?"

"Because the old man was wild with delight over finding a relative to leave his fortune to."

"Ah!"

"There was the motive. I established that at the start, for a will existed previously, favoring Paul Elliott."

"A plausible one, surely."

"The old gentleman was discovered dead in his chair in his library, two months ago, stabbed to the heart."

"After the arrival of the niece?"

"The very night. She could not have been three hours in the house when the deed was done. Poor Miss Althea! She has been prostrated ever since."

"It must have been a terrible shock."

"I suspected the boy at once. My first clue I found hidden under his bureau—this."

Detective-sergeant John Morris unrolled his parcel. He produced a blood-stained dagger of peculiar workmanship.

"Belonged to the boy?" interrogated Nick, handling it critically.

"Oh, of course he says not. List slippers, tossed under his bed. Here they are. Stains on the soles."

"I see."

"Crumpled letter, written that day by the boy to Mr. Elliott. Here it is—threatens him vaguely if he does not remember him in the will."

Nick scanned a blurred penciled page.

"Rather clumsy on his part, that, I count it," he commented.

"Worst of all, when we arrested him he grabbed a document from a drawer and tore it in two."

"That looked bad. What was it?"

"A will which he had stolen, for it was one leaving the fortune to the niece, Miss Althea Elliott."

"You have some pretty formidable clues," admitted the detective.

"The court said so. The boy was sullen, stunned. His defense consisted of hysterical denials, broad perversions of palpable facts. Yes, I nailed him. Here on business, Mr. Carter?"

"Oh, I am through with active work, you know," smiled Nick.

"I never knew you to waste time traveling without an object, though," insisted Morris, shrewdly.

"To tell you the truth, I am on a little jaunt with three of my pupils."

"I've heard of your great detective school. Turning out full-fledged wonders fast?"

"Just the average. I believe detectives are born, not made, and I have discovered a few embryo geniuses in our line. I expect my contingent here this evening, and, by the way, Morris, they may want a little information from you."

"You know I am at your service and theirs completely."

"Very well. They ran down one end of a very fascinating counterfeiting case in New York. The other end seems to be here. They are coming on to find it."

"Pretty confident, seems to me!"

"Yes, they are confident boys," remarked Nick, oracularly—"sufficiently so to bag a whole satchel full of spurious ten-dollar bills in New York. The plates and the gang got away, though. They tell me, when they put their finger on a slippery fellow named Escher, they end the

case. They are satisfied he is here in Chicago."

"Never heard the name before. Well, I'm due at the Central. Stroll that way with me?"

"A square or two to get the air, yes. I say, Morris, it strikes me that Elliott fellow was a pretty stupid specimen."

"On the contrary, he is remarkably bright"

"And left all the clues this crime so a night watchman might stumble over them?"

"Oh, he fancied he'd never be suspected."

"Then he didn't even have good sense," commented Nick.

All unawares, the great detective had spoken words that were to lead him closer than he ever calculated to the true inwardness of the famous Elliott case before the night was through.

Nick, as he uttered them, was locking his room door.

The minute he passed down the corridor with the detective-sergeant, there was a rustle.

In an obscure angle of the hall near by stood a large square laundry basket.

Its top pushed up cautiously, a head came out, a form followed—Paul Elliott.

His face was working curiously. His breath came quick as he gazed after the disappearing duo.

"Nick Carter!" he murmured. "If half they tell of him is true—of kind deeds, of shrewd deeds, of humanity, of justice, of honesty, he is my man! He sees the clues in my case might have been planted. Oh! if I dared to approach him, to tell him the truth, to plead for his aid—no, those two are friends; he would not believe me. I must work out my own salvation. Some guiding genius seems to have directed me so far. It is my last chance to get those clues. Every step I take on the public streets may be a step over a powder mine, but—one last bold stroke, makes all or spoils all!"

Detective-sergeant John Morris walked out of the Palmer House full of himself, and, therefore, with eyes for nobody else. Detective Nick Carter listened indulgently to his chatter, but at the same time, as was his custom, took in everything going on around them.

That was how it came about that Paul Elliott, following the twain, came within his range of vision, cautious as was the latter.

Nick, however, only saw a lurking figure acting in a suspicious manner, and took his frequent sidelong glances with no idea that the latter had any designs on himself or his companion.

It was pure curiosity only that sharpened Nick's senses, as his chattering comrade turned down Quincy street, and he noticed the prowling figure quicken its pace.

Paul Elliott's heart was beating mightily. He had eyes but for one object—the parcel the detective-sergeant carried.

Suddenly he made a pounce, a grab. Nick Carter was a quick man, but two elements favored the purpose of the boy, who, in a minute or two, could boast that he had done what very few people had ever before accomplished—got ahead of the veteran thief-catcher.

In the first place Paul Elliott approached the unsuspecting Morris from the inside of the walk.

In the next place such a thing as the real identity of the lurker Nick naturally never dreamed of, and therefore he had no reason to suppose that he had any designs on the parcel carried so carelessly in Morris' hands.

Quick as a flash, however, the instant the boy demonstrated his real purpose, a dozen suggestions furnished a possible connecting link in Nick's mind, a dozen prompt muscles sprang into action to defeat escape.

That quick arm of Nick's shot out like magic. The boy dodged the grasp, slipped, but it struck him and sent him keeling across the sidewalk.

He came slap-dash against a bucket. It was filled with paste, and belonged to two men bill-stickers, who, mounted on light ladders, were covering a huge poster board with the blanket pictures of some lurid theatrical show.

The boy's foot tipped the bucket, its slippery contents gave a broad fling, he sped free of it, but Nick, who in another second would have had him safe and close, found himself right in the centre of the spreading stuff.

Nick, as unlikely to lose his balance as his wits, might have appeared somewhat undignified for a flashing second or two, but he did the very best circumstances would allow.

He slid and slipped, and evaded a fall through most dexterous maneuvers, sprang free of the slippery pitfall, and made for the fugitive again.

Paul Elliott saw him coming. He saw also, too astounded to yell at first, but now just getting ready for action, the startled detective-sergeant, John Morris.

That functionary's eyes dilated wildly as he observed the parcel in the fugitive's hands, as a broad glint from an electric lamp brought out his features.

"Carter—the boy—Paul Elliott!" he blurted.

"What! He was a prisoner, I thought—"

"He is free!"

Both men were now hot on the heels of the runner. Around the corner, in solid phalanx, just then turned the squad of some preventive and protective watch, on relief duty.

Their steady, measured tramp, the blue wall of coats, the gaping brass button eyes, struck dismay to the soul of the fugitive.

He looked back, he glared sideways; then, just in time to escape Nick Carter's grasp, he sprang for a great high telegraph pole.

Six feet up began a spike ladder. The boy caught the lowermost projection. He swung his dangling feet in Nick's face as the latter, too, gave a spring.

It was now an aerial race. Nick was nimble, the boy spry.

Where the wires of some sectional system grouped was a platform and a testing annunciator. The boy reached this, got on it, and looked down.

Nick was coming steadily up. He was not the man to leave things to chance. He had witnessed too many daring escapes at the top of a chimney, the apex of a roof, the end of a flagstaff, to give a spry athlete, such as Paul Elliott showed himself to be, any leeway. But at the platform the iron spikes ended. Twenty feet above was another group of wires, but simply strung to crosspieces. The boy directed a hopeless, worried look at Nick,

at the detective-sergeant, shouting below in a paroxysm of wonder and suspense.

"Give in, my boy; it may be better for you," came up Nick's tones, kindly, rather than mandatory.

Paul Elliott wavered. Then he thrust the parcel he had secured into his coat.

"No!" he answered, in a resolute gasp.

"He's a good one," muttered Nick.

The boy resumed his ascent the ensuing minute, and Nick saw why and how.

On the platform he had found a pair of hooked pole-climbers.

He must have strapped them on quickly, for he was digging his way aloft within thirty seconds after reaching the platform.

Nick had no means of pursuing him, but he kept his eyes on his movements, wondering what the boy expected to gain by this new maneuvre, scanning wires and surroundings, and calculating what dive, swing or jump the fugitive might have in view when he reached the cross-trees.

Below, the detective-sergeant had gathered a group about him by his excited tones and gesticulations.

Red in the face, fairly dancing with emotion, his revelations of the identity of the last daring act of the notorious Paul Elliott were working up the watch and the gathering citizens to a similar state of excitement.

"He's lost!" suddenly shot from Nick's lips.

Nearly to the top, he saw the boy slip. One of his hooks apparently scraped instead of catching.

He dropped plumb; then he went sideways. Nick was somewhat appalled, for the fugitive was started headforemost for the hard stone pavement thirty feet below!

Whang! vibrated a harsh contact.

Swish!—sharp as escaping steam, mingled a second sound.

A guide wire ran from the pole on a keen slant.

Taut as a ship's cable, it caught the boy; he grappled it with both arms.

Hanging on for dear life, he simply let himself slide, arms hooked, but the wire running as in a groove where one elbow was held at a rigid crook.

The other end of the wire encircled the

protruding central post which held up the great sign-board at the edge of the sidewalk.

Against this the boy landed with a slam, attended by two sharp crashes.

His dangling feet struck one of the ladders and sent it and the bill-poster on it toppling; with such force did he reach his journey's end that the blow of his body stripped a ten-foot section top ornamental moulding of the bill-board clear out of place.

Nick Carter was down the spike ladder in a twinkling.

"There he is! Put up the ladder! Get him!" yelled the distraught sergeant.

"No, catch him—he's fainting!" cried another voice.

It looked as if the boy had been stunned. Pitifully helpless, swaying weakly, his face colorless, his eyes half closed, he seemed on the point of losing sensibility.

By a superhuman effort, however, he rallied.

As Nick's feet touched the pavement, he saw the boy lift himself.

Then over the top of the battered bill-board, rather like an inert bag of grain hoisted than a human being climbing out of view, out of sight he went.

Nick heard a dull clump on the other side of the bill-board.

The detective-sergeant ran forward. In trying to ascend the remaining ladder he tipped it over. The fallen bill-poster called to him.

"Here's a little swing gate."

He kicked open some hinged planking as he spoke, making a narrow gap in the immense bill-board.

The detective-sergeant dove for it, halted, squirmed and stuck there, too ponderous to get through.

Nick Carter employed no ceremony in jerking him free, but valuable time was lost.

Darting through the opening, he found no trace of Paul Elliott.

The vacant lot had nothing but a stringer fence at its other end, and over this, Nick was satisfied the daring fugitive had climbed fully two minutes before.

There was a hunt and a search, but it proved unavailing.

The detective-sergeant was in such a

tempest of excited frenzy that he kept himself busy giving orders to the watchmen, countermanding them, rushing to the nearest patrol box, storming and raving till Nick decided that he would be serviceable for no further coherent companionship, that evening at least.

The veteran detective retraced his way to the hotel, quite thoughtful, a little chagrined and yet somewhat speculative over the peculiar actions of the boy he now knew to be the notorious Paul Elliott.

"There's a screw loose somewhere in Morris' layout," he soliloquized, as he reached his room and unlocked its door. "The boy is smart as lightning, and yet nobody but an idiot would keep unmistakable evidences of crime in his own sleeping apartment. Queer move, too, the break for those clues—and such a break! It was positively brilliant. What do you want?"

"You."

"The boy!"

Nick Carter felt those calm, well-conditioned nerves of his jump for the first time in many a day.

He was just entering his room, was closing the door after passing its threshold, when a sudden force pressed it back open.

A hand quite as determined as his own flung it shut.

Face to face, one wondering—and it was the imperturbable Nick Carter—one pale, resolute, heroic—Paul Elliott—those two looked into each other's eyes.

CHAPTER IV.

NICK CARTER'S PUPILS.

Nick Carter was forced to take a few seconds to command his astonishment.

His visitor stood like a statue, confronting him, his back to the door, his young face grim as iron.

"You are Paul Elliott?" spoke the detective.

"Yes."

"Escaped from prison—more recently escaped after robbing detective-sergeant John Morris of some records of justice?"

"Yes."

"What do you want?"

"You."

Rarely in his checkered experience had Nick Carter faced a situation like the present.

There was something as tragic, as passionate, as thrilling in the deep insignificance of this critical ensemble as the suspense of a culminating movement in some intense drama.

"You!" repeated the boy, calmly, but a volcano of emotion raged plainly under the surface. "You are Mr. Nick Carter, the great detective. I have come to ask you to help me."

"Have you fully realized that I am on the side of the law?" demanded the detective, gravely.

"I have."

"That my duty is to hand you over to the authorities from whom you have escaped?"

"If justice demands it, yes."

"Does it not?"

"No."

"And why?"

"Because I am innocent!"

Nick Carter spoke not a word. He looked squarely down into the fearless eyes of his visitor. They never flinched.

"Look!" quavered the boy, his tone breaking slightly, "into my soul, into my motives, into the poor, broken life the law is hunting down so relentlessly—look, Mr. Carter, you whom men call good, and generous, and noble as well as great, and add one more laurel to your well-earned fame by saving me from being crushed!"

All the boy's heart seemed to go out from him in that plaintive, forceful word.

He sank to a chair, covered his face with his hands, and his frame shook like an aspen.

"Poor fellow!" spoke Nick, feelingly. "We will look into this."

Nick Carter was glad that an interruption gave him time to mask emotion genuinely aroused.

There came a knock at the door. Paul Elliott swiftly glided out of its range.

He saw the detective receive a card from a servant—even at the distance he was he noticed that it was covered with some cipher message.

The detective reversed it. Upon its back he scrawled some like symbols, handed it and a key to the servant, pointed to an adjoining apartment, spoke

some whispered words and reclosed the door.

He counted it a singular coincidence, that as he gave his visitor a reassuring wave of the hand, the latter glided to the identical chair at the same table where Detective-sergeant Morris had been seated an hour previous.

More striking still was a second peculiar fact.

Producing from an inner pocket the same parcel Morris had carried, like Morris, Paul Elliott unfolded it and spread out its contents.

In other words, the same clues that had been used to convince the detective of Morris' shrewdness, were now evidently to be arranged to prove exactly the contrary of what the detective-sergeant had claimed.

It was like a trial in court—the prosecution had rested its case, and the defense was about to come forward with its side of the argument.

The crumpled letter, the dagger and the slippers were separated one from the other. Their manipulator looked up inquiringly.

"Proceed," nodded Nick Carter, simply.

"One question first, please," spoke Paul Elliott. "Mr. Carter, do you think that I would do all I have done, skirmish in the very precincts of justice, risk my liberty, place myself freely in your hands, if I were guilty?"

"No."

It was Nick who was monosyllabic now. He met this visitor's bluntness half-way.

"I am innocent. To the last moment, Gabriel Elliott, whom I am accused of killing, was my dearest friend. Up to the hour when Miss Althea Elliott, his niece, arrived, we were like father and son."

"And then?"

"A thunderbolt, a shock. One hour after her arrival, Mr. Elliott came hastening to my room. He handed me the will he had made that day leaving his property to his niece. He was pale, excited, frightened. He told me to destroy it—he would explain later."

The detective looked puzzled.

"Two hours afterward there was an up-

roar in the library. I rushed down. My benefactor was dead, stabbed to the heart, Miss Althea wailing in hysterics over him. The police were summoned. The next morning I was accused. It was then I tardily strove to destroy the will. That is all."

"And the knife?"

"I never saw it before, nor the list slippers, nor the letter."

"They were found in your room?"

"I saw Detective-sergeant Morris discover them there."

"Then——"

"Look at that letter closely, Mr. Carter."

The detective did so.

"Dictate a line or two from it while I reproduce."

It was done.

"Compare them. They say you are an expert on chirography. Could the same hand produce both?"

"It would be impossible."

"The slippers. Do they fit me? Two sizes too small."

It was so. Actual measurement proved this.

"The knife. Look on the handle, studded with some peculiar green stones I never saw nor know the name of. Here are no elaborate clues, Mr. Carter—on the contrary, clumsy efforts of the real murderer to fasten the crime on me."

"Yes!"

"You believe it?"

"I do."

"Oh thank you! In court they laughed at me—I had simply been shrewd but could not hoodwink justice, they said."

"And the real murderer?"

The boy's lips were set firm.

"I do not know."

"You suspect——"

"Shall I tell you? Would it be right for me, with my knowledge of the law's fearful mistakes, to place a suspicion against another, when I have no proofs?"

"None?"

"Of murder, none."

"My friend," said Nick Carter, keenly, "you are hiding something from me."

Paul Elliott was silent for a minute or two. Then he looked up.

"Listen," he said. "I believe in my inmost heart that the person who insti-

gated the killing of Mr. Elliott, was his niece, Miss Althea Elliott."

The detective made no sign. Looking for some culprit outside of the boy, naturally he might have included the woman in the list of possibilities.

"Go on," he said, simply.

"I believe Mr. Elliott discovered something about her after her arrival that changed her welcome; as witness, I was directed to destroy the will."

"Possibly."

"I believe she had an accomplice."

"Ah! we are getting closer to the facts," encouraged the detective.

"I have little right to say this, for my suspicions regarding the woman are simply conjectures."

"And as to her accomplice?"

"She secretly met a man at the rear door of the house early the morning following the murder."

"You saw them?"

"I heard them. I heard her distinctly say, 'You have done your part.' I heard him reply, 'I will vanish—remember the address where you are to send the money and the goods. Remember the name.' "

"That's all?"

"All."

"And the name the man gave?"

"Joseph Escher."

"Joseph Escher!"

The detective projected the name as if it was a hot bullet in his mouth.

"Joseph Escher!" voiced double tones, and the drapery of the connecting room moved aside and two boys stood revealed.

"Joseph Escher!" shouted another voice, and a third boy, incomparably bright, buoyant and active, jostled the others aside and stood staring at Paul Elliott as if he had just solved the enigma of a century.

In trepidation and amazement the latter retreated.

"Who—who are these listeners?" he ejaculated.

"You need not be alarmed," Nick hastened to say. "They are three of my pupils, my trusty assistants, just arrived from New York."

"Joseph Escher!" repeated the boy who had been last to appear. "Mr Carter, a dove-tail!"

"Or a coincidence?"

"No. This is marvelous! We lost his trail in New York three months ago. We got the scent west. We arrive to find——"

"That the counterfeiting case and the Elliott case run back to the same source—to the same man? Very possibly."

"You encourage the theory?"

"Is it worth investigating?"

"Then this is my case!"

The speaker went straight up to Paul Elliott, and to the profound astonishment of the latter, placed his hand on his shoulder.

"What do you mean?" inquired Paul Elliott, drawing back perplexedly.

"It is all right," spoke up Nick. "My young friends have been listening to all you said, as I directed they should, in a message you saw me send to them. Yes," he nodded to the boy at Paul Elliott's side, "this shall be your case. The same Escher or not, you have heard the story of the Elliott affair. What have you to say about it?"

Out shot the free, impulsive hand of the veteran detective's youngest and cleverest protege.

It clasped that of the forlorn refugee with a fervor that thrilled every nerve with energy and hope.

"Paul Elliott," said the boy, looking into his eyes with the confidence, ambition and spirit of a professional who had already made a record in detective service, young as he was, and believed he could do it again, "I will run down this Joseph Escher; I will find the real murderer of Gabriel Elliott, I will clear you within ten days, or my name is not Bob Ferret!"

CHAPTER V.

UP ALOFT.

"Bob!"

"That's me."

"All ready."

"Good for you! Now, boys, you have your cue. Forge ahead!"

Bob Ferret was Nick Carter's youngest pupil, but he directed his two companions with the air not only of an expert professional, but with the grace of a born leader.

There was nothing dictatorial about him, and that was why Jack Burton and Aleck White obeyed to the letter.

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tot,

was usually exactly right in what he did, and that inspired further confidence and willingness.

When Bob had so dramatically told Paul Elliott that he would clear him in ten days, he meant what he said, and believed he could do it.

Twelve hours found the New York detective's brightest ally with every theoretical detail of the case in grasp; in twenty-four he had all loose ends gathered to a focus and was not only ready for action but in the field.

He had the benefit of Nick Carter's advice, he had the satisfaction of seeing Paul Elliott comfortably and safely stowed away in a boarding-house in a secluded part of the city where he was ordered to remain in hiding until he heard from his new friends.

"It was worth dollars to see that boy's face when he knew we were going to help him out," Bob told his two young cohorts.

"Yes, Bob, and it will be worth double-eagles to hear him hurrah when your ten days are up, and we've bagged Joseph Escher, and introduced Mr. Detective-sergeant John Morris to the real murderer of old Gabriel Elliott!" piped Jack, and Aleck, the sober, thoughtful member of the trio, nodded gravely but confidently an assent.

Bob was all fire and enthusiasm when he started in the real work on a case.

These were the elements that had recently enabled him to make one of the most brilliant strokes ever accomplished by an amateur in a great bank robbery case in the East.

Nick had picked him up, a diamond in the rough, from the streets of New York. He was the youngest of the detective's little coterie, but he had often exhibited a mature grasp of facts, an energy and intuition that fairly astonished even the experienced veteran himself.

So Nick had no qualms or fears in telling him to take charge of the Elliott case and go ahead in his own way.

Bob's "way" was to go up to the scene of the murder the morning after the escape of Paul Elliott.

When he returned to the Palmer House that afternoon, he looked as buoyant and confident as a general who has viewed a

prospective battlefield and sees all the points of advantage on his side.

"Big, rambling old place," he told Nick; "the girl Althea, an old woman colored servant, her boy, and a man who takes care of the stables, all there are about the place. House shut up like a jail. Ring at the door, a chain lets it open just an inch. They're guarding a secret in that house, I tell you! Now, fellows," to his assistants, "ready for business?"

"All right," piped Jack and Aleck, eagerly.

"To-morrow morning you go up to the Elliott place. Here's your plain duty, Jack, to follow the hired man if he leaves the house, see what messages he takes, telegrams, and the like; Aleck, to keep track of the woman servant. I'll take care of Miss Althea Elliott and that monkey of a colored boy. Remember one central point—Joseph Escher. All others are mere threads in the dust leading to the main actor, and that's the counterfeiter, who is probably as well the murderer of Gabriel Elliott."

"Are you going up there now?" asked Jack.

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"To take a night skirmish. I want a good view of the persons I haven't yet seen except at a distance. Now, boys, you have your cue. Forge ahead independent of me, and report progress to Mr. Carter if I don't show up."

So it was understood. Each member of the trio had his simple duty to perform. Bob left the hotel at dusk, whistling as carelessly as if he had nothing on his mind more important than an idle evening stroll.

Not a very favorable evening for strolling did he find it, however.

The sky was overcast, and one of those unreliable northeasterly zephyrs was cutting around corners, swooping and chiling.

He was glad for the shelter of a cable car. It was way up in what had been a suburb of Chicago two years before that he finally alighted.

Just beyond South Park Boulevard there was a nest of old-fashioned houses.

That belonging to the Elliott estate

was surrounded by a high stone wall, and looked more like a convent site than that of a residence.

There was no difficulty in getting into the grounds, for the wall and gates were in a bad state of repair.

It did Bob little good so far as immediate discoveries went, however, to get inside.

The lower part of the house was dark, shuttered, castle-like.

In the kitchen quarters there was light and motion, and over near the massive stone stables a man was poking around with a lantern, but only one room looked as if it might contain Miss Althea Elliott, and this was up in the second story.

Its windows had the lower inside blinds closed, so, get where he would, Bob could not look into the apartment.

He tried climbing a tree, but it was not in good range, and he seriously planned the use of a ladder he saw near the kitchen garden, when something else gave him an inspiration that soon led to decidedly sensational consequences.

It was dark, intensely so, and Bob moved about freely. He now made a dash for a gaunt piece of scaffolding, grimly outlined, and standing somewhat back from the street.

"Artesian well, windmill power," he murmured. "Why! this is a regular tower of observation. Good! I'll try a climb and a peep."

This source of water provision had evidently been constructed before the city mains had reached out this far, still, Bob guessed, from pails and puddles at its base pipe, that it was still used to supply the stables.

He was a perfect gymnast in climbing tactics, and he went up the iron braces of the superstructure agile as a monkey.

Where the motor crank ran up to the windmill fans he called a halt.

"There's the lighted window I'd like to look into," he told himself, "in fair range, too, but I'm not high enough yet. How's the weather up yonder, I wonder?"

Bob glanced ten feet up the smooth shaft at the cumbrous mass of paddles sticking out like the sections of a pinwheel.

The structure fluttered and creaked in

the wind, but it was stationary, being apparently caught or locked at the cogs.

"Astride that east paddle yonder," cogitated the venturesome Bob, "I'm right in line with the lighted window, where I can probably study Miss Althea Elliott at my leisure. Here goes!"

Bob had a task of it climbing ten feet of oiled shafting. Astride the cogged gearing at the base of the fans he rested.

"Paddles in the way," he soliloquized.

"Hinged? Yes. Strong? They're all right. There's the window and there's the woman. Yes, it's the one I caught a flashing glimpse of to-day. She answers Paul Elliott's description. That's Miss Althea. Now for a study and a watch."

Bob had clambered under one paddle, over another, and lay half flat along the slight slant of a third.

It was broad, flexibly, easy. The wind shook it, little dashes of rain splattered it and made it slippery, but, grasping its edges, he felt safe and comfortable.

He directed his eyes on the window he had gone to so much trouble to scan.

It opened from a luxuriously furnished room brightly lighted—a brilliant-looking woman sat at a dainty table writing.

"That's good," commented Bob. "When people write they tell something. This woman, according to Paul Elliott, claims to have no friends anywhere. I'll make an effort to find out who that letter is going to when she sends it out to be mailed.

Bob was something of a physiognomist. He noted that the woman had a bad face. It was beautiful, but hard, selfish, unresponsive.

He proceeded to make the best possible inspection of the weak points of the house that darkness and a bird's-eye view allowed.

"If there's any object in getting in, I guess I can make it," he decided—"kitchen roof, tower with a trellis, top skylight. Bangetty-bang! Well, what's that horrible clatter?"

Bob glanced quickly toward the rear of the house, from which a tremendous racket suddenly emanated.

The kitchen door was open, and the light from inside threw out a broad stream of radiance.

A stout, waddling old colored wo-

lot,

was revealed, speeding over the threshold. Her arms were full of tinware, and she had just hurled a skillet with all her force.

Flying from her through a trellised grape arbor at the top of his speed was a boy about Bob's own age and size.

"It's that monkey of a colored lad," murmured Bob. "He was in all kinds of trouble when I was hanging around to day. Born for mischief, likely. Go it, old lady! Whew! that was a grazer."

A griddle took the kinky head a side whack as its owner reached the stone wall.

Gaining it and striding it, rubbing his head dolorously, the boy began to whimper:

"Scipio Columbus Buckner! yo' come right into the house! Oh, I'se goin' to pickle a rod for yo', young man!"

"Yo's most killed me!"

"Come in here—d'yé hear yo' mammy?"

"I'se ain't comin' in nevermore for ever."

"Doan' yo' sass yo' mammy."

"I isn't," asserted Scipio. "Yo' won't bang me no more. I'se goin' to be a pirate. I'se goin' to be a cowboy; I'se never comin' back!"

"Scipio Columbus——"

But Scipio Columbus was gone. Over the wall he slipped; bang! came a parting shot, and the old negress waddled back to the kitchen direfully pronouncing the most terrible woes in store for him when he returned.

Bob could not help but take in this little patch of domestic drama with gusto.

"That leaves only two on the scene to handle," he calculated—"old mammy and the hired man. Hello! Confound it! What's this?"

As Bob put back one foot preparatory to climbing down he felt a quiver.

It was so harsh, so sudden that it nearly shook him off his aerial perch.

Following came a whiz. At first he fancied it was the wind. Then he knew that it was caused by some other force.

"The wheel is going!"

Bob's hair rose up straight as he made this discovery.

There came a creak, then a whir.

And then, with incredible rapidity,

head up, head down, dragged in, flung out, amid the rattle, bang and clatter of the grating paddles, Bob Ferret went circling around and around, a breathless human pin-wheel!

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNDIGNIFIED PROCEEDING.

Bob's careless foot had kicked loose the controlling mechanism of the windmill, and it had started up.

"It's a grab, grip, hold on, or I'm a goner!" he muttered, grimly.

The tumbling cogs made a horrible, whistling, grinding noise; when the paddles veered in the stiff breeze they slanted dangerously. Bob felt his senses blur and his breath came painfully, but he realized that he could not move an inch without being battered to pieces and dropped below a shapeless wreck.

"My! I can't stand this long!" declared Bob, as five minutes went by.

For all Bob knew about artesian wells, it might be the general custom to leave them pumping all night.

He groaned in spirit. He flattened out flatter and counted the longest moments he had ever passed.

Suddenly above the moaning wind and the whistling gearing he heard a voice.

It was that of old mammy—at the kitchen door, Bob fancied.

"Yo' sneakin' good-for-nothin' Scipio, turn off dat dratted wingmeal! Yo' want to set Miss Althea's booful white teeth on aige, yo' young imp?"

No Scipio responded, but some one else did. The hired man came from the direction of the stables, growled out something Bob did not hear, came up to the pump, handled some wheel or lever, and as a hollow sound echoed through the supply pipe the wheel began to lessen its velocity, and finally came to a dead stop.

"Thank goodness!" voiced Bob, with ardor.

He got off the paddle quick as he could make it, slid down the shaft, and resting on two broad braces took time to get back breath and wits.

He saw the man around the stables get through his work and disappear, apparently, to some upper loft where he slept.

Then the light in the upper floor went out. The kitchen, where the old colored

woman was ironing, was the only spot finally that showed any activity about the gloomy place.

"I don't see that I would gain much by geting into the house," ruminated Bob. "I might run across some letter or scrap of evidence that would be a pointer, but it's not altogether certain. I declare that banging about up aloft has made every joint and muscles sore."

Bob reflected leisurely. Finally he decided what he would do—descend, get over the wall, and hang around outside for an hour or two.

In formulating this plan he had Scipio in view. It had just occurred to him that he might intercept the colored lad, play on his fears, and induce him to talk about the house, its inmates and their doings, particularly Miss Althea and her possible correspondents or visitors.

Bob had no doubt but that Scipio would return. A boy does not rush into piracy for such a small thing as a tap with a griddle.

Old mammy, too, shared Bob's sentiments, it was evident, for she came frequently out into the garden to cool off and call for her graceless son, whom she suspected to be hiding in the vicinity.

Bob descended and skirted the long vine arbor on his way for the side wall and the street.

He proceeded slowly, for his limbs were quite stiff. Suddenly he stopped, stock still, at the unexpected charge:

"I see yo', Scipio Columbus!"

It was the colored woman who spoke. Beyond the vines, against the flickering kitchen light, not three feet away, she stood.

"Yo' hear me, yo' dratted boy?" called out mammy, with less asperity, but keeping along on one side of the vines, while Bob edged along the other.

Bob dared not venture a reply. They were now out of range of the kitchen light. It was shadow and slink now, and Bob watched his chance for a bolt to the wall.

"Yo' hear me, honey?" pronounced the woman once more. "Why doan' yo' answer yo' respecful mammy?"

Bob muffled his voice, and blurted a word.

"Fraid."

"Land sakes! 'fraid of what? Cl'ar to goodness! hear dat chile! What yo' 'fraid of?"

"Licking."

"Me? Yo' distressin' chile! T'ink yo' old mammy whack a good little boy like yo'? Come'in, Scipio. Yo' mammy got a honey cake for yo'. Hear dat? A buxom, pickaninny cake, all full of raisins and caraways."

Bob mistrusted the coaxing tones and the cat-like progress of the woman.

He was ready for his dash, when he found that he had already lingered too long.

Mammy understood what he did not—a weak spot in the trellis. She had deftly led him to its vicinity.

"I got yo'!"

She had, indeed! With a flare she came through the vines, splitting the rotten strips of wood to fragments.

Clumsy and ponderous as she was, nimble Bob might have escaped the clutch of her flabby hand only that mammy was prepared for contingencies.

In her other hand she grasped a wire hook looped at one end.

It was a "chicken catcher," and as Bob, dodging, slipped her clutch, the wire described a circle.

It inclosed Bob's ankle and jerked him flat on his face.

"I give yo' cake! Ah! yo' old mammy give you caraways, too!" chuckled the woman.

She dragged her victim within arm reach. Bob winched as fingers as big as bananas and hard as knobs took a firm clutch on his coat collar.

"Yo' kill yo' old mammy some day—dat what you do!" she puffed, sinking to a bench, but she never let go of Bob, who was thankful that she held him with his face away from her. "Now den, Scipio Columbus Buckner, I'se going to hurt myself wuss nor I hurt yo', 'cause I'se got a tender heart, but all de same I'se going to give yo' de whackin' of yo' life!"

Up to this point the redoubtable Bob had been rather entertained than alarmed, but he suddenly gave a gulp of dismay.

Of all the undignified complications that had ever fallen to poor Bob's lot,

however, the present capped the climax and made him squirm.

It was quite "professional" to grin and bear a good hard knock in the service of justice, to jauntily face half a dozen frowning criminals when positive death menaced.

But to be handled like a truant urchin—he, the accredited representative of the great Nick Carter—to be reminded of those far-distant days when he had been "spanked and sent to bed"—Bob had to take his medicine, but he firmly resolved never to boast of it.

A mere plaything in the hands of a giantess, he was lifted like a feather across old mammy's broad, solid knees.

Mammy took off her slipper—number thirteen if an inch.

Whack!

"This is not detective work—it's martyrdom!" gasped the wriggling Bob.

Whack! whack! whack!

Mammy vented all the bottled-up energy of days, like a man splitting wood.

Whack!

"Go on, now—yo' shameful chile—go to bed! Oh! but I follow yo' up if yo' doant."

She gave Bob a final slap and a shove.

It headed him on a stumbling run for the open kitchen door.

He could have turned aside, and he might have reached the wall and bolted it.

With a flashing, vital moment to decide, Bob, however, acted on a sudden impulse.

He was fairly driven into the very house, the mysteries of which were the burden of his present anxieties.

"Good enough!" he muttered, grimly, as he slid across the kitchen floor and bolted through a doorway beyond which he saw a bed, presumably that of the unfortunate Scipio Columbus—"old woman, for every tap of that slipper I'll score a ten-strike for justice before morning!"

CHAPTER VII.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

Bob Ferret got into bed as quick as he knew how, clothes and all.

He covered his head with a counterpane and listened keenly, fearful that the troubles of the present might not yet be

ended, for the old woman's voice followed him and kept coming nearer.

"Squinch, yo' young monster!" she cried. "Hide yo' head for shame!"

Then to Bob's infinite relief she pulled the door shut and locked it.

Bob made a rueful grimace. He was not exactly made of iron, and between the windmill and the slipper he had passed through quite an experience.

Bob thought a great deal during a suspenseful two hours of listening and waiting.

He guessed finally that the old colored woman had gone to bed in some room nearby. Then he arose and got himself in trim for a free range of the house.

The picking of the lock of the bedroom door meant the mere twisting of a bent wire, which Bob took from his pocket. He also produced a dark lantern.

Bob knew where the library of the house, the dead millionaire's favorite lounging room, was located, and he gained this apartment promptly.

The very first thing that attracted his attention was a letter lying on a desk.

It was sealed, but the envelope bore no address—just in one corner these words, in a delicate feminine hand, "Deliver personally." It felt fresh, that is, the inclosure was not creased and flat, but bulgy, as if recently placed there.

"The flap mucilage is still damp," investigated Bob. "This letter was very recently written. Can it be the one I saw Miss Althea Elliott inditing early in the evening?"

Bob reflected, hesitated, pressed the flap slightly, drew away his touch and pocketed the missive.

He began next to cautiously open and inspect the drawers of the desk, table and cabinets in the room.

For perhaps an hour Bob scanned a variety of papers, particularly, carefully.

"That's all," he told himself. "Nothing here that sheds any light, past or present, on the mystery of the murder or the antecedents of this Miss Althea Elliott. What would her room reveal? Is it worth the risk to try and find out?"

Bob, debating this point with himself, advanced to where a curtain hung, moved it aside, and curiously played the rays of the lantern beyond.

A cozy corner, a nook, an alcove was revealed. It contained a fine easy-chair, which stood beside a window overlooking the lawn.

Besides this article of furniture, not another object was visible in the room except a gentleman's dressing gown and a faded smoking cap, hanging on hooks beside the window.

Dust covered the chair. Bob readily surmised that this must have been a favorite haunt of the dead millionaire, and veneration or superstition had induced the inmates of the house to leave it uninhabited and untouched since his death.

"Queer people, these rich nabobs," reflected Bob, scanning the faded garment. "I wouldn't keep such a time-worn rag to chop wood in. Here's something."

His hand carelessly sweeping the dressing-gown as he made the remark, Bob detected a brittle rustle.

The next minute his fingers were probing a side pocket of the garment, and the next he had brought out a letter.

"Well!" he said, inspecting the envelope critically. "Postmark Southhaven, or Swifthaven, or Smithhaven, some haven, Florida. Date over two months since. Addressed to Mr. Gabriel Elliott, in a lady's handwriting. Say!" jerked out Bob, in a sudden flare of interest and excitement, "I'll bet it's a letter Miss Althea wrote announcing her coming."

It was, Bob's fingers tingled as he withdrew the inclosures, for they were two—a letter and a photograph.

It was a simple missive. It told that a poor homeless orphan girl wished to come to her uncle.

The picture—Bob's face looked queer as he studied it.

"I've struck it!" he breathed in an intense tone of conviction.

He was struck all of a heap himself, for he sank to the easy chair like a person trying to take in an idea too big to be comprehended all in a sudden.

Bob took from his pocket the enveloped missive he had found in the library, and compared the handwriting of its superscription with that of the other he had just discovered.

Two entirely different handwritings," he pronounced in a tone that settled it.

He scanned the gentle, plaintive face

in the photograph, and called before him a vivid memory of that of the woman upstairs.

"Two entirely different persons," he added, just as definitely. "I've got the clue. Sure as fate, I know the truth!"

To his way of thinking the woman upstairs, accepted as the dead millionaire's niece, was not Miss Althea Elliott at all.

In some way she and her accomplice had learned of the coming of the real neice—had intercepted her, and the present heiress had assumed her place.

She possibly never knew that a photograph of the real Althea Elliott was in the old man's possession.

He had discovered her imposition and had given the will to Paul Elliott to destroy. He had been killed before he could unmask her, and the crime had been fixed on Paul.

This was the way Bob figured out the case. It was such an important discovery that he felt he must at once get to Nick Carter for advice, for further direction.

Quite precipitously he started through the library, so worked up that he did not exercise due caution either as regarded entire noiselessness or the masking of the dark lantern he carried.

Bob came out into the corridor, started down it bent on departing instantly by way of the rear door.

A frightful scream checked him, and then a blaze of light dazzled.

The old colored woman came suddenly around a turn in the hall, a lighted lamp in her hand.

"I thought I heard a noise—burglars!"

She ended the sentence with an echoing shriek. Bob pocketed his lantern in dismay and dodged for the nearest clear space—the stairway.

Up it he put. As he passed a window he fancied he saw a moving figure in the garden.

"I've spoiled all!" he muttered. "This will warn that woman she is suspected. Oh, drat it!"

As he reached the upper landing, however, a new sensation faced him.

Aroused, Miss Althea had run to the hall, lit the gas, and stood facing him squarely, ten feet away.

White-robed, startled-eyed, he took only a flashing glimpse of her, but saw

that in the folds of her robe she held some weapon.

"Stop!" she commanded.

"Not on your life!" bolted out Bob, and forged ahead.

"Burglars!" screamed old mammy, below.

"No, a spy!" hissed the beautiful Miss Althea Elliott, and tone and facial expression proclaimed unmistakably to Bob that she was a being of quick sinister suspicions.

He did not dally as her white jeweled fingers moved upward—he might expect a shot next.

Just ahead of him was a long narrow window.

Both sashes had been removed to give ventilation to the hall.

Bob recklessly made for it, sprung to its sill, and leaped for the garden below.

He gave a quick glance to see where he might land.

His blood curdled as he did so.

Bob had seen a lurker from the hallway window.

That lurker was posed directly below him in full sight now.

It was Scipio Columbus, the colored boy.

Squarely on a slant that exactly met Bob's bounding jump, held poised by a pitchfork.

Squarely, unavoidably for the sharp, glittering tines Bob was headed!

CHAPTER VIII.

A MIDNIGHT MYSTERY.

"I saw yo'!" yelped Scipio, his big eyes goggling.

"Drop it!" screamed the frantic Bob.

"Burglars!" shrieked old mammy, inside the house.

Bang!—rang a shot from the window overhead.

Was ever boy so beleaguered? Alternate chills and flushes criss-crossed Bob's body.

Scipio stood like a statue. He seemed planted like a rock, his husky fists never allowed the pitchfork to wobble an inch.

To be spitted like a fish was not to Bob's liking, but he feared he could not avoid it.

He had less than two seconds in which

to think. He twisted his body—Scipio twisted the pitchfork.

No use, I'm forked!" gasped Bob, but he slapped his feet together and held them square.

Tang!

Smack!

"Murder!"

"Burglars!"

Bang!

As the scene began it ended—old mammy shrieking inside the house, a yell from Scipio, a shot from the window.

Bob was speeding away for dear life—he had escaped unhurt, steel-proof, bullet-proof, for this time, at least.

He could only guess out his lucky evasion of the menacing pitchfork—the soles of his shoes must have struck that bristling row of tines squarely, bent them, met them with a force that hustled the implement from Scipio's hands.

Bob was sure that one foot, as the pitchfork went hustling, landed squarely on Scipio's mouth, sending him flat.

Bob started on a keen run the minute he reached the ground.

He looked back at the window—the woman was blazing away.

"A delicate lady, truly," he muttered. "Oh! you're not the gentle, shrinking girl who wrote the letter, I've got in my pocket; you're showing that fast enough."

Bob was bent on reaching the wall surrounding the grounds at a point beyond range of my lady's bullets, but he saw the hired man come running from the stables and had to divert his own course.

The result was that when Bob made sure finally that he was unobserved and ready to get to the street and back to Nick Carter, he found that his devious flight had brought him right up to the side of the stable.

To reach that portion of the wall nearest to him he must retrace his steps, and this Bob started to do.

He halted rather summarily, a few yards accomplished, however, with a sharp definite:

"No go!"

His course of flight must have been divined by the woman at the window, for Bob heard her sharp, imperative tones, and then he saw two forms scudding his way.

A door leading into the stable was open. Bob made for this. It led up a staircase and into a loft in one end of which was a partitioned off room.

"The hired man sleeps there, I suppose," calculated Bob. "Here he comes, with that yawping Scipio at his heels."

Bob planted himself at a window and watched the manœuvres going on below.

The hired man and the colored boy poked around all the rubbish heaps in sight. Then from the gestures of the latter Bob guessed that they decided he had scaled a carriage shed roof and thus gained security.

The man sat down on a keg, and sent the boy to the house. The boy was gone five minutes, returned with a message, and bent back to the house.

Bob decided it was about time to get off the premises.

He inspected the loft and discovered a door. Peering through the cracks he saw a paved alley outside.

"Nailed up," he soliloquized, "but it won't take much effort to burst it open. Gently now. She comes! One more push —what's that?"

Up through a manger hole came the glint of a light. Then the sound of voices struck Bob's ear. He tiptoed across the floor and peered down.

The hired man had just set a lantern on a grain box, and halted, leaning against it.

The woman, Miss Althea Elliott, followed him, closing the outside door after her.

She had a shawl thrown over her head, and looked pale and troubled.

"Murchie," she said, "who was that intruder?"

"How should I know, mum?" interrogated the hired man in turn. "You saw him. Unless it was young Paul Elliott ——"

"Oh, dear, no!"

"Then I should say some burglar."

"But he took nothing."

"Discovered, and had to fly empty-handed. You see, mum, people suspect we've got loads of money in a big house like this."

"I hope it is so," sighed the woman, anxiously.

"I guess you can rest assured of that."

"Nevertheless, I am bothered."

"Yes, mum?"

"You seem a good and faithful servant, Murchie."

"Try to be, mum."

"And a little extra work for a little extra pay would not make you grumble?"

"Extra work and no extra pay, if it please you, mum," asserted the man, gallantly.

"Thanks; you shall not suffer by being my friend. In fact, I am going to make a kind of confidant of you."

"I'll be true as a trivet."

"Very well. Where is the crate I had brought here day before yesterday?"

"You said to sort of hide it, so here it is," announced Murchie.

Bob followed the movements of the man with interested eyes. Murchie went to an empty stall, pulled over a lot of hay, and then dragged into view a crate.

It was about six feet square, formed of twisted grape vines, and closely packed with straw.

"Do you know what is in that crate, Murchie?" asked Miss Althea Elliott.

"I—that is, mum, I poked it over a bit, and, to tell the truth, it seemed to me nothing but straw."

"There is something in it—in its centre, Murchie," vouchsafed the woman, confidentially. "Nothing of any value to us whatever, yet something important to a certain person."

"Tell me now, is that so?"

"Yes. Now I want you to get that crate out of here."

"To-night?"

"Right away."

"Where to, mum?"

"I want," spoke the woman, steadily, "to get it before morning to a little station on the Chicago and Eastern Illinois Railroad called Brocton."

"I know where it is."

"Fifteen miles out, south. Listen to me. I will put a tag on it—'Mr. Ralph Smith—to be called for.' You will find nobody at the station. Drive up to it, dump the crate on the platform, come back, being sure no one follows you—remember that."

"Yes, mum."

"And—fifty dollars."

The man pricked up his ears.

"Thank you, mum."

"Will you do it?"

"Won't I!"

"Come to the house, get the tag I shall write, take the two coach horses and the light chore wagon, and report to me when you return," spoke Miss Althea Elliott, leaving the stables, the hired man following her.

"It's getting dense!"

The man had left his lantern behind, resting directly on the mysterious crate, and Bob peered down, lost in speculation.

"Here's a new string," he continued, reflectively—"a queer shipment and deuced queer directions. I'm half minded—no, I'm not, I'm whole minded to take a night ride to Brockton myself!"

Bob dropped from the loft, prompted by the energetic idea.

"No great heaps of time to work before the hired man will be back," he reflected. "Straw? Something in the middle? Yes. It sounds like it, way inside. Here's an opening for a brisk young man."

Bob poked in between the meshes of the crate with his hands first, and then with a whip-stock.

The loose packing straw gave easily. Then, finding a space where a broken mesh allowed him to spread the flexible vine strands wide enough to admit head and shoulders, he burrowed in up to the waist.

A square tin box rested in the centre of the straw. He rustled it, tapped it.

"Quite empty, or light stuff in there," he murmured. "Sounds like paper. Wish I could guess the key to this queer freak business. Hello! He's coming back. Say! why not? I've got to—no other way out now."

Bob burrowed deeper into the straw. It was a movement that comprised the first step in the strangest midnight journey ever taken by mortal boy.

CHAPTER IX.

IN DEADLY PERIL.

When Bob heard the footsteps of the returning hired man approaching, he was half way in the crate.

In an instant he dragged in his feet and nestled back in the straw, the strands that

he had forced apart slipping back into place.

Sounds directed him solely for the next two hours—sounds of wheels, the hoofs of horses, the hired man's directions to them, the creaking hinges of broad doors, the trot-trot boulevard echo.

The hired man lifted the crate to a vehicle and started off. Bob made himself as comfortable as he could under the circumstances.

He had actually gone to sleep in the cozy nest the soft straw afforded, when a bump awoke him with a shock.

"Landed!" he muttered.

Yes, as he heard departing wheels he pushed aside the straw, and saw the hired man from the Elliott mansion departing with an empty vehicle.

The case lay upon the platform of a little isolated depot, a sort of milk station, Bob decided, for no houses were near, but there was a roofed-over platform near the tracks such as they shelter milk cans in for coming trains.

"Wonder how long this will stay here for 'Mr. Ralph Smith—to be called for?'" ruminated Bob. "Once more, wonder where it's finally bound for? Once more, wonder what's in the tin box? Once more, I'm going to find out!"

Bob calculated the time—it was about one o'clock in the morning, he decided.

He planned that he would creep out, get a breath of fresh air, work the tin box out of the crate inspect its contents and appropriate or replace them as circumstances dictated.

"This crate must have some bearing on the Elliott muddle," he insisted. "After I have found out what is in it, I can hide in the vicinity and see who comes after it. Quick action! Bless me if I'm going to get out at all!"

Bob thrilled at the sound of voices. On that still air they fell clear and distinct.

"It's come," were the first words that struck Bob's ear.

"Nonsense! That way? By wagon?"

"Why not?"

"Because it was due by freight or express."

"Well, lucky we were in the vicinity. Let's see."

"That big box it!"

"It is."

"How do you know?"

"Here's a tag—'Mr. Ralph Smith—to be called for.' That's all straight. Yes, whoever sent it was clever—wanted no risks of poking, prying outsiders."

"But that big box!"

"Say it again, goosey! The stuff's inside—trust that!"

"All right, if you say so. We're to carry it?"

"No other way."

"Whew!"

Up came a corner of the crate and down went the corner again promptly.

"Heavy?"

"I should say so! We never can lug that four miles."

"Well, it had to be made up as a dummy to conceal valuables inside in little compass. Ha! ha!"

"Why can't they send the flimsy—"

"S-st!"

"What now?"

"Holler your business to the world, you chump!"

"Oh, no one's nigh."

"Flimsy?" muttered Bob Ferret, and his wits bristled.

Did these men use that phrase, as he inferred, to appertain to money, to counterfeit paper?

If so, had ever detective in one single move struck the luck that was his?

He had fathomed the intricacies of the Elliott murder case in the discovery of the letter and photograph, he confidently believed.

This box was intended for Miss Althea Elliott's accomplice—the counterfeiter, Joseph Escher, Bob further vehemently decided.

"I'll drift with the tide," murmured Bob, complacently, and lay perfectly still.

There was a long confab between the two men on the platform.

They discussed going for a wagon, they thought of carrying the crate in among the high corn of a near field and leaving it there till they got assistance—a dozen schemes were thought of and rejected.

"Hold on," abruptly spoke up one of them—"a rock will do it."

"What do you mean?"

"See the tool house up the track?"

"Yep."

"Hand car in there. You wait. Three

miles south means only one mile home, instead of four from here."

"Good for you!"

Bob ventured to part the straw so he could look out.

He observed one of the men go up to a little shed at the side of the tracks, pick up a stone, batter loose a lock, and two minutes later a hand car came sailing down the rails.

"Lift it on," ordered the man who had secured it.

"Just the thing."

The crate was put on the rear end of the hand car. Both men began pumping the handles. The car flew forward.

Bob lay watching them, wondering how his strange adventure would terminate.

At the end of a mile they had got the swing of the car, and were working steadily, at the end of two they were making a time record.

They had reached the top of a rise with a steep embankment on either side, and were approaching a high bridge when the rear man looked up suddenly.

As Bob peered out just then, too, a nameless shiver in the air struck him ominously.

"Jump!"

The word was a shriek from the man who had looked up.

A blinding glare suddenly enveloped his head and shoulders with yellow gilt.

The man in front turned. Bob saw the two forms fairly dive down the side of the embankment.

He thrust aside the straw with nervous fingers.

Of its own momentum the hand car ran out on the bridge.

"Mercy!"

Bob's heart stood still.

Rounding the curve leading to the other bridge approach, on the same track, and going at a rate of fully forty miles an hour, was a passenger train.

A flash, an instant, a scream of mortal terror from Bob, and the locomotive leaped for the hand car, directly in the middle of the bridge!

Crash!—they met!

CHAPTER X.

"FARMER BROWN."

The locomotive struck the hand car with terrific force, and sent it hurtling to a thousand pieces.

Then it passed on, the engineer never knowing what he had struck.

Amid that wreck of splintered iron and wood, to the horror-frozen Bob life was a whirl, a blur, and then a blank.

The shock of the collision had driven the crate backward with a great rebound.

Already too broad for its insecure resting-place, it simply tilted, struck the outside girder of the bridge, and—dropped.

In its descent it crushed against a pile half-way down. It was this contact which shook the wits out of Bob.

Rebounding thence to the river, it splashed under, and one end sticking up, but Bob and contents entirely submerged, went floating down with the current.

The two men who had leaped just in time had rolled down the embankment.

They saw the giant locomotive annihilate the pygmy hand car, as if it was a fly in its course, saw a hail of wreckage blacken the air, and deafened and cinder-blinded, gasped and goggled as the train thundered past them.

"Wiped out!" voiced one, appalled.

"No, the crate is safe," quickly projected the other.

"Safe?"

"Yes."

"How? Where?"

"See it floating out there? Keep with me."

They chased the bobbing crate a hundred feet down shore, caught up with it, waded out and brought it to land.

"Open it," suggested one of the men.

"And get what's inside. Hope it's not wet. To work. Strike me silly! What's this?"

The speaker, ripping off withes and pulling out handfuls of soggy straw, came to a thunderstruck pause.

He had discovered Bob, and Bob, nerveless and senseless, toppled against him, following the disturbed straw.

"A boy!" shouted the other man. "Alive? Yes. Went over with the wreck. Say! how's this?"

"How is it? Was in there all the time, I suppose."

"But—why?"

"Maybe they as sent the stuff sent the boy. What's that? Something dropped from his pocket. A letter. Hold on a second."

The sealed missive Bob had found in the library, the letter he supposed Miss Althea Elliott had written the evening previous, had dropped out of his pocket as he tilted over.

The man had no difficulty in pressing back the flap of the thoroughly-wetted envelope. He glanced quickly over the inclosure.

"It's all right," he pronounced.

"How, all right?"

"This is for our boss—from the woman in the city—the Elliott girl."

"Ah!"

"She wrote it, and as she sent the crate she probably sent the boy with it for some purpose—boss will know."

"What you going to do? Here's what we're after—a light tin box."

At that moment Bob revived momentarily. In a dreamy way he heard one voice say:

"You carry the boy and leave him at the farmhouse."

"All right."

"Then we'll take the box and the letter up to the den to the boss, and tell him about it."

"That's a good plan," and here Bob went off into a second spell of unconsciousness.

When he again recovered, he found himself lying on a cot before an old-fashioned fireplace.

Near it sat a grizzly-headed, white-bearded, heavy spectacled man, the typical farmer in appearance.

Bob fancied he saw him examining his coat as he opened his eyes—slip back some papers into its pocket—study the peculiar little silver badge on the inside lapel that identified him as one of Nick Carter's assistants.

He wondered who he was. He looked very little like a desperate character, and the plain, comfortable farm-house room still less like the den of criminals.

"Hello! roused up?" inquired the man, in a kindly tone, with something of a twang.

"Yes, I guess so—I—I—what place is it?" fluttered Bob, sitting up.

"Brown's farm. I'm Brown. Two men ought you here. Said you was hurt at e railroad."

"Where have they gone to?"

"They went on about their business. aid they'd drop in to-morrow and inquire how you was."

"Oh!"

"Pretty dazed?"

"I got a bad shaking up, and I am not iite over it yet," confessed Bob.

"Well, you lie still. It will be morning on. Sleep'll do you good. Here, drink is—sort of soothing and warming."

Bob drifted into a kind of a waking dream under the influence of the draught iministered.

His eyes did not entirely close, however, and suddenly they opened wide as ever.

His host sat watching him narrowly for half an hour or more, when, evidently adjudging him to be asleep he rose softly.

Bob saw him take up his coat and again aspect the little detective badge.

He saw him rifle his pockets, scan every crap of paper they contained, among them letter and photograph he had found in dead Gabriel Elliott's old dressing gown.

Then Farmer Brown softly, thoughtfully paced up and down the room like a man mightily perturbed.

Finally he went to a cupboard and pened its doors.

Touching a slide, he revealed a second compartment back in the wall.

From this he drew as many as twenty blong objects, neatly done up in tissue paper.

They seemed heavy, for as he proceeded to place them in a basket and over the top with eggs, Bob could guess hat it was very weighty from the way he man handled it.

Farmer Brown locked this basket back in the cupboard and resumed his seat at the fireplace, and Bob, mystified and roubled, never let on that he was awake.

As daylight appeared, Brown hustled about and began to prepare a hearty breakfast.

The appetizing odors of cookery prompted Bob to affect to wake up and get up.

"How feeling?" asked Brown.

"Oh, all right now."

"That's good. We'll have breakfast in a jiffy."

The man kept chatting carelessly, cheerily, all through the meal.

Just as it was ended, however, Bob saw his face change abruptly.

The farmer leaned impressively towards him, and said in a peculiar, confidential tone:

"Nick Carter sent you here."

CHAPTER XI.

THE WARNING MESSAGE.

Bob felt an eerie thrill prevade his nerves.

"You're after Joseph Escher," continued his companion, just as emphatically.

Bob looked at the door as if calculating how quickly he could get out of a place where a denizen knew too much to suit him or be friendly.

"Don't be foolish," pursued Farmer Brown steadily. "Surprise you? Thought I would. How do I know all this? Well, from the way you got to these diggings, from your badge and your papers. Look here, am I right?"

"Suppose you are?"

"I'm the very best man in the world you could run across."

"Is that so?"

"True as turnips"

"How?"

"Tell you," pursued Farmer Brown, glibly, "you're after Joseph Escher's counterfeiting gang."

"You say so."

"That howling success—Nick Carter —sent you."

"Suppose it's true?"

"He's got the whole shooting match cornered, and that means gone up! when Nick's in the deal."

"Maybe."

"I'm simple Farmer Brown, but this gang have been making a sort of an accommodation of me."

"In what way?"

"Oh, they're near here. They come and go. I've been uneasy for a long time past, for I knew what they were up to. Now they're going to be cornered, I want

to get out—I don't want to be dragged into their troubles."

"I wouldn't," advised Bob.

"I won't, and I want to make you a proposition."

"All right."

"You come with me to the town—see me safely there."

"Safely? What do you mean?"

"Not stopped and taken in as one of the counterfeiting gang by some one of your friends, Nick Carter's crowd, who are all around here, I suppose."

"Go ahead," directed Bob, evasively, but seeing a point-of advantage and anxious to clinch it.

"You do that. Let me be away from here when you capture the gang, so they won't think I gave them up, and—the minute I get safe with town friends, I'll direct you right straight to the den of these fellows."

"You will?"

"Sure as sorghum!"

"A bargain!"

Bob was pleased and excited. He fancied he had a plain march to triumph before him now.

Here was a farmer, probable deeper in the mire than he confessed, but so scared with the idea that the famous Nick Carter's allies were lurking in every thicket, that he was willing to do anything to evade being taken in with the Escher gang or punished by them as a traitor.

Bob restlessly went outside, walked up and down the yard, lingered in the open doorway, stood at the window drumming on the panes, eager to get away before any disturbing interference materialized.

He blinked a trifle, as a bright ray dashed across his eyes some reflection from the windows, he carelessly imagined, for the sun was coming up.

There it was again—again a lapse, twice, quickly.

"I say!" ejaculated Bob, with a vast thrill.

For the flashings had come with a regularity that startled him. They came, too, in accordance with the time and number code of Nick Carter's private signals!

To whistle three times at intervals, pause and then twice sharply—to tap three times at intervals, pause, and then

twice sharply—to thus flash, sneeze, shout or fire, was an understood signal among Nick Carter's detective pupils.

So, naturally and instantly, the aroused Bob guessed an apparent fact; some one outside knew he was here, saw him, and was signalling him with a sun glass or watch crystal.

That some one could only be Nick himself or Jack or Aleck. They had struck the same trail he had followed leading to the hiding-place of Joseph Escher's counterfeiting gang, he theorized.

Bob went to the door. He set his wits working actively, and guessed from the position of the sun that those signalling rays had been focused from a little thicket to the left of the road and in front of the farm-house.

Fixing his eyes upon it, his keen glance was instantly rewarded by the view of a human being.

A form flashed from the covert of a tree clump to that of some high bushes.

It was a quick skither, a glide, swift as the dash of a falcon, but it was Bob's business to take in things quickly, and he saw all there was to see.

"It can't be!" he fairly gasped.

The prowler in the thicket, undoubtedly his signaller, was not Jack, nor Aleck, nor Nick Carter.

"Paul Elliott!" pronounced Bob next, incredulously.

He did not guess this from the face or attire of the figure—these were disguised, different than their semblance when Bob had last seen the accused murderer of old Gabriel Elliott.

But the figure itself was unmistakable—the shape of the face, the build of the head, the quick, nervous motions of the shoulders.

Bob uttered an internal whistle of wonder. The boy he had left in hiding with strict injunctions to lay low had been unable to do so, he reflected.

He had started out on his own hook, he was working on his own case—he had either followed the Elliott wagon, or he had got a trace of the Joseph Escher crowd in some other way.

More than that, he knew that Bob was here, in the farm-house, and was signalling.

Bob suddenly remembered that Paul Elliott had been present, two nights previous, when he and Jack and Aleck had discussed the very same code of signals just transmitted by the sun-glass.

Bob doubted mightily that any benefit would come from a novice like Paul Elliott appearing in an important case where even professional acumen was being tested to the limit.

Still Paul had shown himself to be a boy of extraordinary energy and pluck.

"He signalled me, he wants a reply," murmured Bob. "How can I give it?"

He glanced through the open doorway into the adjoining room.

There Farmer Brown was at an open bureau, removing some papers from it, industriously tearing up some, pocketing others, preparatory to hastening to town.

Bob saw a dog chained in the yard, and a helpful idea suggested itself to his mind.

"Mr. Brown," he called out, "that your dog?"

"Yes," came the answer.

"What's his name?"

"Tiger."

"Ah! fine looking dog. Tiger—Tiger—Tiger. Tiger—Tiger!"

Three times slowly, a pause, two times quick—shrewd Bob's call, so innocent and natural to Farmer Brown's hearing, distinctly sounded the Carter signal to the boy in the thicket.

Thither Bob looked expectantly. Perhaps half a minute passed it with no demonstration.

Then—

Something shot straight out from the trees, whizzed straight as an arrow toward the spot where Bob was standing.

He dodged as it neared him, turned like a flash as it landed.

"A dart—a pin-headed dart!" he fluttered eagerly. "Slitted at one end. A card in it."

It was a dart rudely made, and apparently sent from some string-shooting stick as rudely constructed by the ingenuous lurker in the thicket, but it answered all purposes.

The pin point imbedded itself in the wood of the door post, and the dart quivered there.

Bob directed a quick glance behind

him. Farmer Brown was still occupied in the second apartment.

Bob grabbed the dart, extracted the card, and ran his eye over its penciled surface.

"Knock me down with a feather!" he gasped, his face a void, his heart contracting.

For the scrawl read:

"Be on your guard. The man you are with is not Farmer Brown, but Joseph Escher, the notorious counterfeiter, and the basket he packed contains the counterfeit plates you have chased half-way across the continent."

CHAPTER XII.

AT BAY.

Bob's head began to swim with the importance of the astounding discovery announced by the dart message.

It was well that "Farmer Brown" did not come upon him just then, for Bob's stupefaction would have certainly aroused his suspicions or have betrayed him.

Farmer Brown, however, did appear a minute later. Bob had just time to conceal the note.

"Hello! looking peaked again," hailed Brown. "Feeling bad?"

"Not particularly," mumbled Bob.

Bob's host was through with his business in the farm-house, it seemed.

He came out, locked the door, pocketed the key, and holding the basket taken from the cupboard in one hand, he hooked the other into Bob's arm in quite a fatherly, confidential way.

"Only a short, brisk walk," he announced, with a keen glance in every direction. "We'll cut across fields."

"All right," assented Bob, thinking furiously.

"I suppose Nick Carter's minions—I mean assistants—are planted all about here?"

"He has lots of them," vouchsafed Bob, simply.

"Glad when I get to town. Then I'll give you the whole layout. It'll be quite a capture, won't it?"

"I should say so."

Bob ventured many a sidelong and backward glance as he was hurried along.

He wished he had a weapon—he would challenge his companion to a speedy halt.

With some perturbation he discerned that the open field course they were pursuing did not admit of Paul following them except at very long range.

"I may as well keep on with this fellow," reflected Bob. "Here's the man, here's the plates, only he's lying to me, of course. His sole idea is to get scot free. He's using me as a cat's paw to pilot him past the possible danger-line of detention. What will he do then?"

"Here we are."

Bob drew back in some dismay.

His companion had led him directly up to the borders of a little lake about two miles long.

Tied to a stone was a light skiff supplied with oars.

"Get in," ordered Farmer Brown.

"Why—is—is this the way to town?"

"Don't I know? Certainly."

Bob was very dubious as to the situation. He did not fancy the idea of being adrift with an adroit criminal, in deep water. Further the man was breaking the trail in a skilful way.

There was no help for it, however, for Bob was almost pushed into the boat.

Farmer Brown put in his heavy basket, picked up the oars, and shoved off from shore.

"Now, I call this a start!" he chuckled, quite gayly.

Bob sat, a glum, worried bundle of nerves, at the stern.

His predicament tormented him. Here he was letting a desperate criminal lead him by the nose, actually connive at his escape.

But what could he do? Nothing, except to watch out for some change of front on the part of Farmer Brown, for soon as he was sure he was beyond risk of capture or pursuit, he might seek to dispose of Bob in a summary way.

In silence the boat cut the water until they were fully half a mile out in the lake.

Brown seemed making for its other end direct.

Every time Bob's foot touched the basket and he realied what it contained, what the man was making off with to plant and operate in new fields, he fairly gritted his teeth at a sense of his utter helplessness.

There came a little puff of wind and it

took off Brown's hat, sweeping it into the bow of the boat behind him.

He stayed the oars in one hand, and leaned back and turned back nearly clear around to regain it.

"My chance!"

Bob snatched at the basket, dragged it to the edge of the boat, and dropped it promptly overboard.

With that at least Joseph Escher should not get away!

"What's that?" cried the counterfeiter sharply, suspiciously, whirling around again, his hat recovered.

Bob shot out his hand in a breathless quiver.

The movement of the counterfeiter had brought his hip pocket squarely in range, with the handle of a revolver protruding.

Bob seized it, whipped it free, drew back, planted himself squarely and said:

"Joseph Escher, sit perfectly still or you are a dead man!"

"Eh? Oh! Ugh!"

Like a puppet Brown came about, a-tremble his hands fell to the oars.

His jaws dropped, his eyes started. He looked down the muzzle of the revolver like a man paralyzed.

His glance shifting, he noted the absence of the basket, the broad, rippling eddy where it had sunk.

"You dared—" he began, in a positive shriek.

"Sit still!"

Firm as a rock Bob held the man pinned statue-like.

"I know you—Joseph Escher," continued Bob. "Row ashore. A false move, and I fire. You are my prisoner."

"No!"

The man described a sudden and unexpected movement.

His hands gripped the oars. They lifted, drew from the locks, and the next minute went hurtling through the air twenty feet away.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"We are in the same boat," hissed Escher. "You'll have a tiresome wait, before you get ashore!"

"Oh, that's your game, is it? Well, I don't tire easily."

"Young man," gritted the late Farmer Brown, "you are plucky, but rash."

"Am I?"

"Decidedly so. Will you allow me to swim ashore and escape, and be content with the plates? They are easily fished for and dragged up."

"Certainly not."

"Then—we sink together!"

At first Bob could not imagine what Escher meant by these words.

They were accompanied, however, by a sudden, sliding kick of Escher's boot along the bottom of the boat.

Glancing there, Bob uttered a cry of dismay and Escher chuckled like a fiend.

"Now what are you going to do?" he demanded triumphantly.

Bob did not answer. The counterfeiter had done a decidedly tragic thing.

He had placed Bob in about the most dubious and perplexing situation of all his eventful career.

CHAPTER XIII.

CAGED UP.

"Sinking!" cried Bob.

"That's what," coolly sneered Joseph Escher.

Bob now saw what the man had done.

In the bottom of the skiff was a removable metal slide, undoubtedly adjusted so that, taken out when the boat was beached, strangers could not float it.

This Escher had kicked, not loose, but entirely free, and it had sunk.

"My own patent!" he gloated. "Now then, drown—you meddling spy!"

"Not I!"

The water had rushed in through the hole waist-high and the skiff had sunk almost to the oarlocks.

Bob kept eye and pistol still directed squarely at Escher. A tipping tilt threw the counterfeiter off his balance and he went over.

For a second he held to the boat rail and regarded Bob. Then he struck off for shore. He read too much humanity in his captor's face to fear that he would fire upon a defenceless, struggling prisoner.

Bob did not like the state of affairs, but he had to accept them as they were and make the best of it.

He thrust the revolver under his cap, marked mentally the spot where the plates had sunk, and got over into the water himself.

Escher was a fine swimmer, but Bob was a natural water rat.

Even hampered as he was with clothing, he put ahead in Escher's wake, at no time more than ten yards behind him.

Both were panting and very nearly done out as they neared the shore.

Escher made a wading break for dry land, intent on an instant rush to cover.

"Stop running!" came thrillingly close on his heels.

Bob was after him, revolver in hand, and fired a scare shot in the air. Escher halted, looked like an angry lion trapped, and then—suddenly dropped flat as a pancake to the ground.

The movement was no trick or trap, but occasioned by something he saw where a path began among the bushes.

Bob now saw that something also—two more revolvers in the hands of two burly men.

"Adams!" shouted Escher.

"Yes."

"And Marlowe. Shoot. One of Nick Carter's brats!"

Bob backed to a firm foothold, ready to fight.

So quick and deftly, however, that it made his head spin, the two new actors on the scene described a series of prompt acrobatic manœuvres.

He was disarmed, knocked down, tied up, gagged mute, as if the new-comers had a patent machinery method of execution.

He looked up to observe Escher talking rapidly and earnestly with them.

Bob recognized them. They were the fellows who had discovered him in the crate knocked into the river from the hand car.

"Tell Smith to get to cover instantly," spoke Escher, and with the words he darted from the spot.

The two men picked up Bob as if he was a billet of wood, and carried him in an opposite direction through the bushes.

The man who had just made off was surely Escher, the prime mover, the directing genius of the gang.

Disguised, his mission had been to pose at the farm-house and direct the operations of his accomplices.

These, three in number, under charge of a man named Ralph Smith, the man

to whom Miss Althea Elliott had directed the crate, were getting ready to run off a lot of counterfeit money in a big barn near by.

The tin box in the crate had contained an imitation of the fibre paper used in government bank notes.

The arrival of Bob, the sinking of the plates, the flight of Escher and the fear that Nick Carter with a whole army of officers might soon be down on them, had disturbed operations at a critical period.

The men reached a barn and were admitted after a parley from within.

Bob was carried past two heavily armed men, and an outfit of stones, presses and dies, and thrown into a stall full of hay.

Then an animated conversation ensued between the four other occupants of the place.

Their leader seemed to be a dark-faced, intelligent-looking man they called Ralph Smith.

He was all nerves and action. He questioned Bob's captors as to Escher, the plates, their prisoners, their intentions.

"If we are surrounded," he said, finally, "to leave here is simply to walk into an ambush."

"Well said," nodded Adams.

"We can guard this place like a fort until nightfall."

"Against an army."

"Let us do so. Meantime, get the wagon ready. If nobody troubles us till dark, we will make a break for the den in the city. Once safe there, I will send for—you know—Miss Althea Elliott."

"That's it," piped a satisfied voice.

"There's no cash in the prospect, with the plates gone and Nick Carter on our trail."

"Well, I guess not!"

"We have no money. I helped Miss Althea Elliott out—she must give us enough money to clear the country."

"As Escher has done."

"Exactly."

"And this boy?"

"We will take him with us to the city den. He may yet serve us as a hostage."

Bob groaned. His wings were clipped, his youthful ardor dampened.

About his only satisfaction was that

the plates he had chased half way across the continent were fathoms deep out of the way of mischief—about the only hope he had was that Paul Elliott, whom he knew to be in the vicinity, might make some move before night to outwit the counterfeiter.

Nobody came near him until nightfall. Then he was lifted and placed in a wagon with two horses attached.

The men had been working over this vehicle half the day.

It was a common farm wagon, but they had constructed a false bottom in it of corn stalks.

Under these Bob was placed, and after him crawled the man Ralph Smith, Adams and Marlowe.

The remaining member of the gang, a big fellow with a big farmer's straw hat, piled hay and bags over the top of the dummy floor, opened the doors of the barn and drove out into the night.

"Not a word now till we reach the den in the city," ordered Smith. "And you, Roberts."

"Well?"

"Take unfrequented streets, and watch out sharp."

"Ay, ay. Wait—I've left the whip in the barn."

The wagon started up two minutes later. Bob, helpless, mute, felt his heart sink as they proceeded uninterrupted.

"Paul Elliott must have lost the trail," he cogitated, ruefully.

The horses were spirited steeds and they made good time. Through cracks and loose wisps Bob could see finally that they were traversing lighted streets.

The roar and din of city traffic drew nearer—they plunged into it.

"We'll soon be safe and snug," commented Smith, peering through an interstice.

"Hello!"

"What is it?" inquired his nearest neighbor.

"That dolt of a Roberts is taking the most public street in the city!"

"What!"

"We're lining the lake front."

"And going like mad!"

"I should say so! What's the idiot's idea, anyway?"

Bob screwed his eye close to a crack.

He made out the park, the lake, just ahead the battery building.

A part of this he knew was occupied as a police station.

Just at that second, with a flare and a dash, out rolled a patrol wagon clatteringly.

"Roberts!" called up Smith to the driver. "Get off this public street."

"Get up! Get up!"

"Goodness!" gulped Bob, at the sound of that voice.

The horses were prancing like mad now.

The driver's whip cut the air like a swift sickle. His hat blew off.

"Zounds!" fairly roared Smith. "Boys, we're tricked, we're trapped!"

There was a mighty rustle in the wagon box.

"It's not Roberts!"

"What!"

"No. Out with your pistol—out of this rat-hole trap, quick. The driver is not Roberts, but—"

Click! went three prompt revolvers, and Smith finished the sentence ominously:

"Paul Elliott!"

CHAPTER XIV.

RUN DOWN.

In one flashing thrill Bob Ferret took in the entire situation.

"Good for you!" he cheered mutely, and he only wished Paul Elliott could have heard him.

He understood instantly what had occurred—the mystifying substitution on the wagon seat.

Paul Elliott was not off the trail—he had been very closely upon it.

When Roberts the wagon driver, had entered the barn after his whip, Paul must have gained it in some secret way.

He had downed, silenced Roberts, he had donned the big straw hat and taken the lines in hand.

Now, hatless, pale, slashing the maddened horses to a tremendous rate of speed, he was making like mad for a haven of justice.

Whir—the wheels tipped as he described a sharp curve. Click-clack—over stone flooring they flew—bang!

Straight into the patrol house, which

its wagon had just left, past a score of amazed policemen who fancied a runaway, with such force did the wagon go that it was driven clear against the end wall, smashing the shaft to splinters, knocking both frightened horses to their knees and bringing the wagon to a halt with a shock.

"Shut the doors!"

Sharp as a pistol shot rang out Paul Elliott's tones.

Bang!—from the hay and straw came a sharp report.

Paul jumped from the seat.

"Men, officers," he panted, "out with your guns! Three of the most desperate criminals in Chicago are in that wagon!"

"What!"

"Here's a go!"

"On guard, boys!"

"Surrender!"

Amid a wild fusilade, the crashing to of the broad outside doors, the scurry of feet, the rising of three forms in the wagon box like phantoms, Bob thrilled, gloated, quivered, never minding one bit the feet that trampled him, the risk of being riddled by bullets—deliriously exultant over the brilliant stroke of genius that certainly brought to a focus the great Elliott murder case.

Shots, smoke, flashes, he heard, smelled, saw. Then a groping hand seized him; he was dragged from the wagon by Paul Elliott.

The face of the latter was white with excitement, but his trembling hands freed lips and limbs of his helpless comrade.

Bob came out into the light just in time to witness the last act in the tragedy of the moment.

The three counterfeiters had leaped from the wagon and were held like hunted rats in a corner of the patrol house.

Adams and Marlowe had thrown down their revolvers, and Smith had scowlingly pocketed his in the face of a dozen dismounting them in the hands of as many uniformed officers.

"Now then, what's this?" demanded the captain of police, turning inquiringly to Paul.

Before the latter could begin explaining, however, Smith made a bold break.

It was for a near window. He had al-

most gained it, when, quick as a flash, an officer near by raised his club.

Smith dodged. It missed his head, but, coming down, it landed squarely on the revolver sticking out of his hip pocket.

There was a sharp report, a sharper scream—felled by his own weapon, discharged by a blow that would have been a chance one ninety times out of a hundred, the counterfeiter lay prostrate.

"The last check cashed!" he murmured, and closed his eyes.

Bob saw a telephone in the next room. He was at it in a second, and a second later a message flew over the wires to Nick Carter at the Palmer House.

The captain of police looked like a man listening to a lurid tale of fiction as, an hour later, he sat the centre of a group composed of Nick Carter, Bob, Paul Elliott, Jack and Aleck.

Nick had found many loose ends to pick up in the case, and immediately after his arrival had sent an officer to the vicinity of the farm to secure Roberts and to fish for the plates in the lake.

Another was dispatched to the mansion of the murdered millionaire to apprehend Miss Althea Elliott.

For Paul Elliott's story and that of Bob left no doubt as to the innocence of the former.

Bob produced the letter and photograph of the real Althea. She was yet to be found, and while they were discussing that phase of the case, the police surgeon, who had been attending Ralph Smith, entered the room with a grave face.

"The man is dead," he announced.

"And his confession?" inquired Bob, eagerly.

"Here," answered the official, producing a folded paper. "He acknowledges that he killed Gabriel Elliott and planted the clews to convict Paul Elliott. He says he got wind of the coming niece of the millionaire, intercepted and imprisoned her, and that the woman known as Miss Althea took her place."

"I said so," nodded Bob. "And the real niece?"

"She is in the custody of a friend of Smith's near Milwaukee."

Before daylight a message was sent and one received from that city—the real Althea Elliott was free, and on her way to

claim her own and reward those who restored it to her.

Before daylight the false Alt under lock and key; Adams, M. and Roberts were keeping her company and the basket containing the plates had been recovered.

Just as Nick Carter and his party were about to leave the station, a highly excited personage burst into the office.

It was Detective-sergeant John Morris, and he had eyes only for Paul.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "they were up to tell me. Caught again, eh?"

"Scarcely," replied Nick, smiling. "My friend, a shrewd young fellow, seems to have overthrown all your theories and clues."

"Eh? what's that?"

"Listen," interrupted Paul Elliott. "He told the story complete that I am the wonderful work that had been done by Nick Carter's youngest pupil."

"The only fact to be deplored is that marked the veteran detective, "Joseph Escher, the king bee of the combination, got away."

Bob's lips grew grim, and his voice took a resolute tinge.

"Mr. Carter," he said, "he was the man we supposed at first, the murderer of Gabriel Elliott, but the friend and admirer of Ralph Smith, the real assassin. By the chief centre of the great counterfeiting scheme we have worked so far run to a conclusion, and a dangerous man to be at large."

"Undoubtedly," nodded Nick.

"We've got his accomplices, the plates, but I shall never rest satisfied," declared Bob, "till I run the criminal Joseph Escher, to earth—and I'll do it, too, some day!"

"And I will help you," promised Elliott.

"Yes," said Bob Ferret, "I can't want the assistance of the clever man who made such a brilliant success working on his own case!"

[THE END.]

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